"A POWERFUL, BEAUTIFUL HORROR STORY."—KIRKUS REVIEWS *(STARRED REVIEW)*

HAILEY PIPER

Queen of Teeth

BRAM STOKER AWARDS® WINNER

"...ONE OF THE BEST HORROR BOOKS OF 2021."—RUE MORGUE

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“Piper’s evocative novel is an intoxicating mix of graphic body horror and lesbian romance. Painful questions regarding corporate accountability, personal redemption and forgiveness, mental health, and the nature of love revolve around the novel’s three fascinating main characters, Yaya, Doc, and Magenta. The elusive worldbuilding—When is the story set exactly? Is it on an alternate Earth in an alternate timeline?—serves the story well, heightening its menacing tone.
A powerful, beautiful horror story.”— *Kirkus Reviews (starred review)*

“*Queen of Teeth* promises teeth and tentacles, yet delivers so much more. The complexity of the world Piper crafts is believable and expertly done. The book defies strict genre definition as it dabbles in horror, science fiction, and romance to create a truly toothsome experience. Fans of Piper will adore this book and new readers will be quick to pick up her previous titles after this delightful initiation.”—*Tracy Robinson, Rue Morgue*

"*Queen of Teeth* by Hailey Piper is so fucking good, and so fucking gay, that I am absolutely in awe. Like a city-destroying monstrosity secreted within a human form, this dystopian body horror story conceals layers upon layers of romance, tragedy, guilt, and what it means to be human. I would happily be devoured by it again and again."—Lindsay King-Miller, author of *Ask a Queer Chick*

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Dedicated to
Janelle Monae
and
Mel Blanc
for the voices and the tunes.

Queen of Teeth

BY HAILEY PIPER

She should never have come.

White debris breathes through cracks in crumbling walls, and black smoke climbs toward the moon. The high school lies a broken eggshell, and beyond its lot, she finds the reason she has been called here. A new creation cries forlorn in the night, baptized in the blood of teachers, peers, and family. Once a teenage student weighed by purse and books and expectations, now turned a pale dragon, countless limbs thrashing as boneless ropes, eager to burn the world. There is monstrous beauty in the blood-spotted skin, and beneath, an intense desire to live. A desire unfulfilled.

She should never have come because, deep down, she can never leave, even when the dragon lets her. Guilt will follow her beyond these soot-coated ruins, through fires and chemicals and once-human screams. Wherever she goes, this night will haunt her for the rest of her life.

one: teeth

1

A red streak stained the baby blue fitted sheet between Yaya's legs. She sat up, kicking away blankets, and let chilly November air crawl into the bed.

Fuck, not now. That wasn't fair; she hadn't even been spotting this week.

Her brain sifted through cloudy memories, filtering good water from sweet poison. Last night's hookup—what was her name again?—had asked if her fingers were touching an IUD and promised in a dry tone that birth control wasn't needed tonight. Yaya had been half-drunk, full exhausted, and figured her body just wasn't getting with the program.

Now she knew why: pre-menstruation anticipation. She didn't need this, especially not in another woman's apartment, in her bed. What-Was-Her-Name would probably be cool about it, most women would, but that hadn't been the case last time Yaya's period popped in the morning after a one-night stand.

Come to think of it, she couldn't remember that woman's name either. Maybe that was the real reason she'd screamed for Yaya to get the hell out. She hoped this new stranger had a little more patience and understanding on all counts.

Yaya slipped from the bed onto cold plank flooring and found her slender black purse at her feet. She carried it to the bathroom, shut the door, and pawed the purse's overstuffed insides—no feminine products. She hadn't been prepared for this.

Any sympathetic paramour would certainly spare a pad and tampon without complaint. And if she complained, Yaya had already stained her sheets and forgotten her name. There were plenty of things to be angry over; borrowing supplies would come low on the list.

Yaya shoved her purse aside and raided under the sink. What-Was-Her-Name kept her pads and tampons in boxes beside folded washcloths, but she was running low on tampons. Fingers crossed she was extremely forgiving and this one-night stand didn't lead to any synchronizing. Yaya sat on the toilet, got herself in order, and then unwrapped the tampon.

It wouldn't go in.

And after all that moralizing. Was it the same trouble as last night with What-Was-Her-Damn-Name's fingers? No, Yaya was sober now and this didn't feel like her muscles clenching. Something was in the way, small and loose, yet hard. Hooking her fingers, she did a little prodding, and it fell into her hand, dotting her palm with red splotches around the lump of bone.

A baby tooth.

She blinked. This had to be a calcium deposit that happened to form a molar's shape. She tossed it between her legs, where it plonked in the toilet water, and grasped the tampon again.

It still wouldn't slide in. She was almost afraid to find out why, but she had to know. Scant seconds after she set the tampon aside, her exploring fingertips brushed larger rounded bones inside her. She couldn't guess how many by touch alone, but they felt set in the tissue.

"Yaya?" The voice bounced her name on a drowsy tongue. What-Was-Her-Name hadn't noticed the state of her bed yet, only that she was alone.

"Just a minute," Yaya said.

She rarely had a convenient cycle. Never did it strike while she was in the shower or already seated on the toilet. It always hit when she was walking to the bus stop, or manning the register at Jumpies, or right after sex, as if there was a button up there marked *Push here for eggs, crimson-side up*. As a bonus to poor timing, her period always struck with fun quirks. Acne rashes, fatigue, skull-splitting migraines.

By contrast, surprise teeth didn't seem so bad.

She wasn't misinterpreting the shapes, either. They were small, capped by corner lumps, like molars, and were that not proof enough, the baby tooth lingered in the toilet bowl below. Small and large teeth alike somehow hadn't torn the vaginal wall, that she could tell. Her only pains right now were the cramps that stabbed her abdomen.

It could mean worse though. Her condition. Thirty-one years old, these things happened, and best have it checked before work today. She wiped her hands, dug her smartphone from her purse, its transparent shell case patterned by wires and circuits like a '90s toy, and called her Sibs station.

"Yolanda Betancourt," she said when prompted.

"Yolanda Betancourt," an automated yet feminine voice echoed. "Your next mandatory acute zygote manifestation syndrome appointment is scheduled for Monday, November 12th, at 11:15 in the morning at the East Newark Medical Station in Newark, New Jersey. Thank you for calling. AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical, making your world a better place!"

Yaya hit zero—no operator answered. She asked to speak with a human, but ABP seemed fresh out. Every visit to an AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical Sibs station had been on their time, but they couldn't make an exception when she had chompers growing between her legs.

She gave up on the phone, unwrapped a pad, and stuck it into her underwear. It would only last so long on its own, but the tampon wasn't fitting and she couldn't exactly call the Tooth Fairy to swap the teeth for their worth in

dimes. Maybe she worked for ABP. Yaya tossed the tampon in the garbage and blustered out of the bathroom.

The bedroom opened to one side, the living room and kitchen to the other, furniture neatly spaced, the photo frames even and uncluttered, the apartment tidy. Everything the opposite of Yaya's cramped, messy studio.

What-Was-Her-Name sat up on her queen size bed. She couldn't have been a few years older than Yaya, but her short hair was stark white, tussled in bedhead style. She probably bleached it. Her stern yet sleepy smile crossed her pale face.

Drums beat between Yaya's legs. She scarcely remembered going home with the stranger, but her body sure did. Or maybe this was an odd cramp. Or more teeth.

What-Was-Her-Name stretched limber arms and yawned. "You're going?"

"Jumpies called," Yaya said, scurrying to the foot of the bed—leggings, bra—and then toward the living room's white sofa—tank top, scarf. Her buttoned top lay draped over the dark wood bookshelf. "Surprise early shift."

The stranger peered into the living room—what the hell was her name? It started with a D, didn't it? She seemed half-waiting for Yaya to go, and also half-reluctant. "I was about to offer breakfast," she said.

Yaya tugged on her bra and then her tank. "I'll get it on the way."

Starts-With-D hummed. "Suit yourself. You were hungry last night, tried to take a bite out of me." She flashed two fingers that must have brushed against secret teeth.

Yaya cringed; she could almost feel them gnashing inside her. Fingernails scratched fingertips as she hastily buttoned her top and yanked leggings over her waist. She wasn't the kind to hang around. The night was over, and so were they, never again would their ships cross in the night, all fish shall be set free in the sea, and so on.

The mattress creaked. "Did you bleed in my bed?" the stranger asked.

Yaya found her winter coat in a pile of shoes beside the door. She threw it on and looked back with a sheepish grimace. "Sorry."

Starts-With-D shook her head, smile practically glowing. "It happens," she said. "They'd ambush my ex, too."

Yaya thanked the sex gods for exes. "Do you—" She tried to stop the question, but it tore loose anyway. "You ever find teeth inside when you get your period?"

The stranger cocked her head. "Periods have been odd the last few years, but no."

Yaya couldn't stay here any longer. Bad enough that her blood had to have

soaked through, ruining the sheets. Hopefully not the mattress, but she wasn't going to stick around for Starts-With-D to find out.

She turned to leave, where her own reflection stared from a mirror clinging to the back of the apartment door. Her winter coat puffed over her, and black curls tangled around her face, flushed from running around, nose and cheeks already red with cold. The glasscutter jaw she'd inherited from her grandmother stuck out when she grinned, but that was her usual. Red vessels painted her blue and hazel eyes, also like any other day.

Perfect. She didn't look like a woman with teeth up her vagina.

2

Yaya had never visited a private doctor's office before. Other people with her condition sometimes went to the emergency room, but that had never happened to her. She stuck to AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical's Sibs stations, easier that way. The waiting room for Sunnyside Fertility was alien territory.

To the left, half a dozen people sat in plastic seats and tapped at their phones. To the right, a gorgeous brown pillar of a woman loomed behind a sunken countertop where she worked at a computer.

Yaya slinked toward the reception desk and said, "Excuse me?" A wooden nameplate said Jessie, but Yaya didn't want to assume that was the receptionist's name by saying it aloud. Her Jumpies nametag said Yolanda, after all.

Jessie smiled down at Yaya and slid a clipboard toward her. "Name, appointment time, and who you're seeing."

Yaya stared at the lined paper. She had no appointment and filled in her name, wrote ASAP for the time, and question marks in the physician column.

"And can I see your insurance card?" Jessie asked, teeth peeking behind her smile.

What was with the third degree? No one at the Sibs station ever asked Yaya anything beyond her name and card. ABP workers and doctors didn't like questions, giving or getting, and she'd figured it was the same for everyone else. Controlling as ABP was, they handled everything.

"Miss?" Jessie grasped the clipboard's corner and pulled it into her shadow. "Do you even have an appointment?"

"Do I need one?" Yaya asked. "You got to take walk-ins sometimes, yeah? For surprises."

Jessie adjusted herself. She had to spend half her evenings benching parked cars. Yaya was nothing in this shadow.

A weird pulse ate down her abdomen. She'd never felt cramps this strange, usually more knife-like than itchy and squirming. Her hormones had to be protesting the change of scene. They wanted their usual Sibs station.

Jessie's customer service smile shrank. "Insurance?"

Yaya reached into her purse and withdrew her red and white ABP card. A clinician swiped that little plastic rectangle each month when she came and went from the Sibs station. Swiping it here would probably send the bill to ABP, and they could bounce it back and forth with Sunnyside while someone actually helped Yaya for a change. ABP's apathy had surrendered their say. They wouldn't kill her for getting a second opinion once in her life.

But Jessie didn’t swipe the card. She wouldn’t touch it. “You’re one of those chimeras?”

“Chimeras, double-zeroes, freaks—your preference,” Yaya said. The itchy squirming slid down her arms and legs. Her nails begged to tear skin, but she gripped the reception desk instead. “That a problem?”

“You’re supposed to go to those stations for the cute zygote thing,” Jessie said.

“Acute zygote manifestation syndrome.” Yaya leaned over the counter. Jessie didn’t lean back, but there was a shift. The itch sank between Yaya’s legs, as if to remind her why she would bother with Sunnyside at all. “There was a complication, and I needed help pronto. Don’t you ever have down-there complications?”

“You have no appointment, no insurance, and a genetic condition that no one in normal medicine studies for.” Jessie tapped the desk beside the ABP card. “If you have an emergency, head to the ER.”

“It’s not an emergency; it’s a complication,” Yaya said through gritted teeth. A hot flare shot up her spine. “Look, I just need to know if I got cancer in my cooch, or if it’s Sibs coming home to roost, or some new STD, okay? I’m not asking much. Can someone here please take pity on me for all of two minutes?”
A door opened behind the reception desk, and a harrowed-looking woman in white coat and blue scrubs leaned through. She handed a manila folder to Jessie and took the clipboard. “Yolanda?” she asked.

“Yaya.”

“I’ll squeeze you in.” The doctor scribbled across the clipboard. “If you can wait.”

Yaya peered at the clipboard. Her row’s physician column now said Dr. Ruby Kaur. Yaya settled back from the desk, and the squirming heat shrank to some deep place inside her.

“I can wait a little,” she said, her voice shrinking too. She wanted to run to the restroom and find out what the hell her downstairs teeth were doing, but their inner tantrum had taken the fight out of her.

Ruby called up a man from the waiting room, and Yaya took his seat. The others patients shuffled as if she’d disturbed a body of water, but no one spoke. A flat TV clung to the back wall, the news droning at low volume about the stock market, set against a graph full of squiggly lines. Yaya wondered if those same lines now curled through her guts.

Heat stroked her side, someone leaning past his seat and toward hers. She glanced left, where a white thirty-something with a blunt chestnut beard tried a reassuring smile.

“It’s okay,” he said. Wavy hair fell over his forehead.

Yaya kept staring, her brow creasing.

His smile widened. “No shame in showing up here. Everyone needs help with one thing or another.” He extended a hand. “Bryant Peters.”

Yaya looked to his hand and then back to his bearded face. “Free tip, Bryant? Fertility clinic—not the dating hotspot it’s cracked up to be.”

Bryant grinned, all hair and teeth, and held up his hands in surrender. “Yowzah, right to the bone. Got it, message received, loud and clear.” He leaned into his seat and looked to his phone, probably to tell his friends about the psycho he’d met while cruising for a date. Weirdo.

Yaya tried to clear her mind, but her internal radio’s every AM/FM channel seemed tuned to one distracting song on loop. *Teeth, teeth, teeth.* The beat was decent, but the lyrics needed work, their subtext unpleasant: She could look like a woman without teeth downstairs, but that didn’t help how she felt or what she thought.

~

Two hours passed before Ruby said, “Ms. Betancourt, follow me.”

Yaya’s joints cried as she stood. She had been to the restroom twice to switch pads. Ruby led through a door past reception, across a short hall, and into a stark examining room. From what Yaya had seen on TV, she guessed this was normal for non-chimeras.

But the pale light and long blue table reminded her of a morgue. She sat on crinkly paper.

“Is it serious?” Ruby asked. She didn’t shut the door.

Yaya shrugged. “Nobody on their period would come to a gyno if it wasn’t serious, right?”

“So, you’re menstruating.” Ruby scribbled at a notepad. “And you’re concerned about a sexually transmitted disease. Are you sexually active?”

“Wouldn’t that be a given?”

“Are you going to answer every question with a question?” Ruby tapped pen against paper. “If you’re going to be combative, the door’s behind you.”

A guilty tremor slid through Yaya’s guts. “No. I mean, I’m sexually active, yes.”

“No one likes these conversations, I promise.” Ruby scribbled again. “When were you last sexually active?”

“Last night. But she didn’t—I’m not pregnant.” Yaya hoped.

Ruby rattled off a checklist of past menstruation and sexual partner questions and then left. A nurse with salt and pepper hair appeared, passed Yaya a paper-thin gown, and shut the door on her way out. Yaya struggled into it a few seconds before the door opened again for both Ruby and the anonymous nurse.

“Why help me?” Yaya asked. The gown fit worse than her Jumpies uniform, bunching at her hips and hugging her gut.

“I’ve only examined a few people born from the INZ9-00 outbreak, all in their late teens,” Ruby said, shutting the door herself. “You’re the oldest, furthest past puberty. I want to see what’s new. Tit for tat.”

“Lab rats don’t pay the bills.” Yaya was certain AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical saw their relationship that way during mandatory checkups.

She knew the teeth could be acute zygote manifestation syndrome, AKA Sibs, the AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical-branded demon that lived in every chimera’s genes. This wasn’t uncommon. Other chimeras suffered much worse, bodies splitting at the seams or stuffed up with tumors. That Yaya should produce a growth wasn’t surprising. Less expected that it had taken until now and manifested this way, in this part of her body.

“Are you staying?” Yaya asked, chinning at the nurse.

“Of course,” the nurse said, and she offered a warm smile. “This can’t be your first visit to the gynecologist.”

“Chimeras get Sibs checkups.”

“But besides that. When you were younger, right?”

Yaya didn’t answer. Her mother hadn’t exactly pushed the point on medical care, and Yaya only knew what she knew. She sighed and let Nurse Nameless help seat her and put her ankles into stirrups. Fresh squirming rippled up her spine, its heat sharp, and she gripped the seat’s sides to keep still.

Ruby slid stretchy white gloves over her fingers. “So now the million-dollar question, my dear. What brings you here? An ordinary check-up would land with ABP medical, right?”

“Could you just check without me telling you?” Yaya asked. “It’d be cool if I’m imagining things.”

Ruby’s face flashed concern. “I don’t know what they tell you at the stations, but in my experience, women don’t subject themselves to this by imagining things. Even if whatever you think is happening to you was your imagination, there’s a cause, and I want to know.” She raised a speculum at Yaya’s front. “I’m going to inspect the outer tissue, and then we’ll work our way in. Are you okay with this?”

No one at the Sibs stations had ever asked that. Yaya felt tears, but she

didn’t know why. “Ready, captain,” she coughed out.

Pressure struck the folds of skin between her thighs. She tried to remind herself how many women she’d welcomed to touch her. This wasn’t so different, right?

Except it was, a touch both neutral and overwhelming. A nervous gut-level tick told her she should be upset, that this examination was scarier than it felt. She wouldn’t obey. Muscles did what her brain demanded, not the other way around. Or maybe all parts of her would do as they pleased. That nervous squirm shot down her spine and struck between her legs.

Ruby flinched. “What was that?”

Yaya craned her head back. “It’s not my Kegel exercise.”

“This can’t be.” Ruby leaned in again, exploring more carefully. “I’m sorry, bewilderment isn’t very professional.”

“Is it teeth?” Yaya asked. Someone had painted the ceiling an ugly orange.

Ruby took her pregnant pause to late term. “It is. But I shouldn’t be able to tell that from the outset. Embryonic tissue that forms a vaginal dermoid cyst should be covered by more tissue. These are open teeth. Do they hurt?”

“They don’t.” Yaya had to yank her voice out of her throat. The question was terrifying. “Tumors, right?”

Ruby’s fingers pressed folds to each side. “I’m no dentist, but it looks like a full-formed set of teeth. Upper, lower. Incisors, canines, molars—the works.”

Another squirming wave made Yaya clench her toes. Something rippled between her thighs.

Ruby twitched. “And they snapped at me. Control them, please.”

“I don’t know how.” Yaya regretted coming here. She peered down at Ruby, facing the top of her head. “Can you get them out?”

“They aren’t loose teeth, Ms. Betancourt.” Ruby couldn’t stop staring. “They shouldn’t be able to bite. There shouldn’t be any jaw bone, tendons, muscle—”

“I’d like to close my legs now, if you’ve got your eyeful.”

Ruby slid back and let Yaya slip her legs together from the stirrups. “I’ve never seen anything like this. Genuine vagina dentata is impossible.”

“That’s what everyone says about me. ‘Yolanda, you’re impossible.’ You get used to it.” Yaya twisted off the seat and started pulling off the gown. Ruby and Nurse Nameless could watch if they liked.

Ruby snapped off her gloves. “You don’t have to leave yet,” she muttered.

“I got a whole mouth in my vagina and there’s nothing you can do about it,” Yaya said.

“We’d like to collect samples.” Ruby nodded at the nurse. “Could you get a

work kit? And we'll want to schedule a blood test across the hall."

Yaya dug her phone out to check the time. They had already made her wait.

A text message stole her attention. No name, only numbers. *Fun last night, I would love to see you again, hope I'm not reaching out too soon*. Last's night hookup must have asked for Yaya's number, and in her half-drunk haze, she'd given the real thing.

She swiped the text away, eyed the time, and then turned back to Ruby and Nurse Nameless. "I'll be late for work if I hang around any longer," she said.

But deep down, she really didn't want to be touched again.

3

Yaya grinned at Jumpies customers as they stepped into the 24/7 corner store, as if showing teeth while she manned the register might erase the *teeth, teeth, teeth* chant from her head.

The growths had to be part of a tumor. Yaya had read about them popping up without warning, twisting all manner of wayward organic matter inside. Ruby must have thought tumors, too, or she would've answered Yaya at the clinic. Cells were doing things they shouldn't in places they had no business being. In that way, tumors and Sibs didn't sound too different.

Thirty-two years ago, there was no such thing as Sibs. Yaya wasn't conceived yet, Nancy Reagan had just won the '88 election, and when you heard the word chimera, you thought of a mythical monster drawn by an overeager, animal-loving five-year-old. But then AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical cracked INZ9-00's eggshell.

Nihilistic pundits suggested it was a cure for overpopulation that backfired, while religious figures alleged ABP had tried a good old-fashioned tampering in God's domain.

Not like anyone could ever be certain of ABP's genuine goal. For all Yaya knew, some corporate Frankenstein had stirred up random organic code and then released it just to see what would happen. In some cases, the later-named double-zero virus caused sterility. In others, tumors. More frequently, the virus conjured up a weird form of super-fertility, so much that Yaya once wondered if the virus's true purpose was to create more ABP customers. Twins, triplets—those made sense.

Most often, though, the kids formed genetic chimeras.

The way Yaya understood, a chimera like her happened when Zygote A partially consumed Zygote B. She should've had a twin. Instead, still-growing Yaya had slurped up her sibling. Now she wore two sets of DNA, divvied up between different organs.

A condition that ABP could claim to own when facing Congress later. Their higher-ups underwent investigation for the virus, but consequences came in short supply back then. Because their virus had caused developmental differences in offspring, they argued successfully to co-ownership IP rights to chimeras' DNA sequence.

This might have meant nothing if not for Sibs.

If a chimera formed when Zygote A partially consumed Zygote B, then Sibs was the result when Zygote B bit back. The DNA strands demanded each

become their own person, but Sibs never struck before puberty, and by then no chimera remained in the womb. Without enough genetic material, chimeras' bodies tore themselves apart, donor organ rejection on a systemic scale.

No corporate entity wanted to dole out free healthcare, but because of the IP arrangement, the situation offered company terms that even AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical understood—you break it, you bought it.

From puberty onward, every chimera submitted to monthly mandatory Sibs checkups.

Yaya couldn't see the point. In all these years, ABP hadn't found a cure. That didn't stop her from going every month, free checkup being free, and Jumpies didn't exactly provide healthcare benefits. Checkups promised she didn't have an STD when she and Starts-With-D had slipped under the sheets.

But along with taking weight, height, and blood, ABP doctors gave injections at every visit. An immune system booster here, a suppressor there, antibiotics galore. She never asked questions, but now she wished she had. *What are you putting inside me?* Doubtful they would have answered in any helpful way.

A mystery flowed in her veins, like her body wasn't hers. And according to Congress, that was somewhat true. ABP had a say in what it put inside their intellectual property.

And if they put the wrong thing inside? Maybe a helpful injection had backfired and triggered Sibs through Yaya's DNA. Her last checkup on October 12 might have started a countdown, and only a month later was she getting the toothy memo.

Was ABP to blame?

Freaking out seemed natural, but Yaya tapped her foot to the teeth song until the Jumpies bell rang her out the glass sliding doors and onto the street. November clouds capped distant skyscraper peaks, their grays mixing into a sooty miasma. Ashen concrete covered Newark the way green kudzu smothered trees down south. In the last five years, Springfield-Belmont had turned from any other smattering of urban buildings into a breeding ground for hideous luxury condos. AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical filled the first of Newark's glassy skyscrapers, with their claws grasping for others. More marketing teams, more research centers, more everything they could catch.

As if their hold on Yaya and every other chimera weren't enough.

Nowadays, the city was a new thing built on the grave of the old, its name inherited. Some brick apartments and shops lingered from when Yaya was a kid, but every year a shiny new skyscraper crested the horizon. She didn't mind the new bus lines or population boom, but to think of Newark as a big deal seemed

fantastical.

The bus let her off up the block from her apartment, and she followed the sidewalk between a chain-link fence and the street. Kids with spray cans clustered beside a neighboring apartment building, tagging the bricks with a graffiti mural of twin girls, their skin painted in warm browns, reds, and yellows over turquoise letters that read Gemini. Though their eyes were only amber paint, Yaya felt watched and known. These girls could tell that misery laid heavy stones on her mind. Joy could wet those stones, but it would never dislodge them.

"Mind your business," she muttered, and hoped the painter kids scattered before a cop tank rolled through, its treads kicking asphalt chunks every which way.

At least the kids had each other. She didn't want to be alone right now. Last night's hookup had been a rock, unfazed by Yaya's slipup this morning, the kind of personality she could wrap her arms around in a stormy sea. She could call Starts-With-D from the text's number.

Yaya wasn't the type to stalk, text, or call back. Only once had anyone tried to dig hooks in after their hookup, and she retreated when Yaya made it clear she wasn't biting. Flowers, jewelry, and restaurant dates seemed like overcomplicated rituals to mask cavalier promiscuity. Yaya preferred honesty when she went rocketing from bed to bed. Sure, sometimes those rituals paved the way to concrete relationships, but did that concrete build a home where lovers lived, or cement shoes that helped them drown?

Yaya couldn't set foot on that alien world, but right now her apartment seemed a dismal place to go. She'd taken her tiny place, shoved into the corner of her building, solely so that she could afford to live alone. Standing on the curb, that no longer seemed wise. The bed would be cold; no one had mussed its sheets in two nights. Dinner would likely be Chinese leftovers, if they were still fresh, eaten while watching cartoons on her phone and then topped off by a midnight scrape around the peanut butter jar.

She called Starts-With-D as northbound traffic crawled past the sidewalk. There was a first time for second chances.

The phone rang three times and then chirped: "You've reached Doc." Doc. The name didn't ring a bell and didn't sound right. Surely she'd had a more memorable name than that, or Doc was a nickname. "Calling has become a lost art, but you seem to like it, so leave a message." Another chirp.

Before Yaya could speak, her phone buzzed alive in her hands. She panicked, ended the call to Doc, and answered without stopping to check the number.

“Yolanda Betancourt.”

Yaya’s skin itched. “Yeah?”

“This is an important reminder,” an automated voice said. “Your next mandatory checkup for acute zygote manifestation syndrome is Monday, November 12th, at 11:15 in the morning at the East Newark Medical Station in Newark, New Jersey. Please arrive twenty minutes early, and thank you for your cooperation. AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical, making your world a better place!” The call ended.

Yaya bared her teeth at the phone. “I got the second opinion first, if you don’t mind.” Maybe they already knew that. She didn’t expect them to be any more helpful than Sunnyside Fertility when she checked into the Sibs station in two days.

With ABP’s call having faded, Doc’s number filled the screen. Third chance.

No, Yaya wasn’t doing this. She would go home, change her pad, and dig through her messy closet for something sharp to wear. She didn’t need last night’s stranger; she needed a new stranger, and a drink, and loud enough music to drown out the teeth song.

4

Lo-fi beats and ambient synthesizers welcomed Yaya through the neon-lit door at Pandora's Aquarium. The gay bar had grown off the side of Bruen Street a few years ago and become one of Yaya's regular haunts for its gentle yet busy atmosphere and meager dance floor. Blue lights lined the ceiling, coating the open room in a mellow calm.

Fulki stood alone behind the bar, which said the crowd wasn't getting sloshed enough yet for her to call Danielle for reinforcements. Did knowing all the bartenders' names mean Yaya had a problem? At least not one worth thinking about. Sleeping with a bartender, maybe, but that was a one-time occasion.

She stuffed her puffy winter coat and white scarf into a cubby by the door and stepped deeper inside. She wore a pastel lavender suit, black top, and gentle heels that helped her crest the halfway point between five and six feet. More than a drink, she needed to look this way, feel this good, especially after today.

She sat on a barstool, promised herself it wouldn't be her perch for the night, and asked Fulki for a Sex on the Beach, "And double the Peach Schnapps."

"What happened to that top you left with last night?" Fulki asked, grabbing a vodka bottle by the neck. "Moved on already, huh? You're a devil, Yaya."

"So says my mother," Yaya said.

"Try not to break too many hearts tonight, okay? You're a lot to clean up after."

Yaya nodded to Fulki and sipped her drink. Sitting at the bar soaked her in a familiar ocean. Women who eyed her, women she eyed, their flirtation a dance of glances and doubt. Such looks had landed her naked in Doc's apartment in the first place.

Someone slowed in passing and then turned to orbit Yaya. "You smell sweet," they said, their fluffy hair bobbing when they spoke. "What perfume you wearing?"

"That's just me," Yaya said, grinning. Her jaw was sticking out, she could feel it, and hoped Fluffy Hair liked it as much as she did. "I'm not wearing anything though. Sometimes I smell like peanut butter."

Fluffy Hair smirked. "Sounds like a bad evolutionary trait."

"Yeah, if the world goes to shit, I'll definitely be eaten by starving dogs." Yaya waited for Fluffy Hair to finish giggling. "But who'd let that happen?"

"Exes of mine say that's the natural state of things. Dog-eat-dog world."

Fluffy Hair stared with brilliant brown eyes. They had russet skin and a gigantic smile that Yaya would've loved to kiss.

"Multiple, huh?" she asked. "Sounds like a committee."

Fluffy Hair shrugged hard, their shoulders weighed by bad experience. "You know what they say. Date three Ayn Rand fanboys and you've dated them all."

Yaya chuckled, wondering if any of them might be named Bryant Peters, and then an uncomfortable twitch hit her gut. Skin crackled, and hair stood on end, both painful and electric. She'd been hornier on her period before, but never this vast chasm opening inside herself, her abdomen giving way to a valley of restless lightning. Its novelty made no sense. The drink might have been getting to her; she'd doubled the Schnapps after all.

She wondered if she'd felt this unhinged when Doc took her home last night. They had used protection concerning Doc's fingers and Yaya's tongue, but all safety was fallible. Yaya had been too perturbed with her morning discovery to ask about contagion, be it some unknown tooth herpes or otherwise.

Worse, she was a special case. The double-zero virus had made a lot of special cases, thousands of chimeras. Maybe her fucked-up DNA, mixed with the wrong bacteria, could sprout teeth within hours, an unexpected down-there problem. She wished she hadn't gotten that damned reminder call. ABP was a soul-sucking void, and she had hoped a drink might fill it for a few hours.

Teeth, teeth, teeth overpowered the bar's music.

~

Sex wasn't worth exposing Fluffy Hair or anyone else to Yaya's problem. When her front door creaked open sometime after ten, stairwell smelling of cleaning product, someone shouting in Urdu upstairs, Yaya was alone.

Mostly. A brown paper bag crinkled in her hand, but she'd forgone the liquor store for a late-open deli. Drink might've failed to drown her thoughts, but come hell or high water, she was going to eat her feelings in twelve inches of meatball marinara sub.

She grabbed a grape soda can, shut the fridge, and stared at the vintage Looney Tunes magnets and stolen stickers she'd used to decorate its door. Foghorn Leghorn pointed up at a blue *I Voted!* sticker, something Yaya had never done. She doubted any cartoon characters had voted either and so didn't judge herself too harshly. Her mother once said that everything had gone wrong after the '88 Presidential election, but Yaya had no basis for comparison.

Incubating in its test tube, the double-zero virus hadn't yet touched her, every chimera's third parent still working up the mood to fuck the world.

She sank onto her bed and began chugging soda. Her meatball marinara sandwich disappeared; she remembered beginning it and finishing it, but nothing between. She hadn't even pulled out a plate, just yanked the sub from its bag and dove in. Had it been anyone else, she might've been proud of them, but now she felt bloated and sick.

Her phone thrummed once, a text message. At worst, it would be another ABP reminder. She dreaded it might be Doc, but deep down in her meatball-filled belly, Yaya kind of hoped for another text. Whatever was wrong with her, Doc had already been exposed.

But the phone did not show Doc's number.

How are you? Mom's text asked. Yaya cradled the phone in both hands, her vision starting to swim. Whether stress, alcohol, meatball marina, or her newfound condition, she couldn't say, but Mom hammered one last nail in tonight's coffin.

Yaya thought about breaking the distance barrier and doling out every awful detail in a giant text blob. It would be the most honesty she'd given in an eternity and the closest she'd felt to family since they'd moved and she'd stayed. But time changed things, and sometimes the only decent answer to an innocuous text like *How are you?* was a likewise benign *Good, you?*

After a minute, Mom answered: *Good too* with a smiley face. Yaya stared at the phone, eyes blazing, but there was nothing more. She could sink into herself right then, imploding on her meatball dinner, and that would be less troublesome than awaiting another message.

Sauce coated the phone's screen and case. It was all over her fingers and she hadn't noticed. She took the phone to the bathroom, wiped it down, and then washed her hands. Her gaze darted to the mirror.

What was that color? Her head tilted at different angles, making sure this wasn't some trick of the light. She leaned over the sink, nose almost touching its reflection. Her right eye had been green when she was little and turned hazel over puberty. Her left eye had always been bright blue. Now it looked darker and wreathed in violet.

What the hell was happening to her?

Wind rattled the window, asking to come inside. Yaya thrust it open, and November's chill breathed across her skin and lavender suit. Putting it on tonight now seemed silly. Who was she trying to impress?

She sighed hard and then stuck her head out the window. Most mornings before she jumped in the shower, she leaned her head out and screamed at the

top of her lungs. Cheaper than counseling, which ABP didn't cover. One rare occasion when Mom had texted more than three words, she mentioned seeing a therapist, said it did her wonders, but Yaya liked the screaming method better. From what she could tell, no one ever tried to find out who was making all that noise and then help her.

Screaming out the window at night was no different. No one cared. No one in this city even had the decent manners to scream back.

~

Sudden hammering struck her chest—her phone vibrating. She sat up and answered quick. "Hello?"

"Yolanda Betancourt, this is an important reminder," a robotic voice said. ABP again. "Your next mandatory checkup—"

"Tomorrow, I know!" She shook the phone. They'd surprised her, and for nothing.

"—today, November 12th, at 11:15—"

She yanked the phone from her head and read the screen. Today? But last night was Saturday. Had she slept all through Sunday, or had she stayed too plastered through her day off to remember? A new fog had taken over, much stronger than Friday night's half-drunken haze.

ABP expected her at the Sibs station today, despite having missed Sunday. Yesterday was laundry day, too. She still wore her shoes and lavender suit, and she didn't feel like changing before heading to the dirty Sibs station. She didn't feel like going at all. If ABP had caused her vaginal situation, maybe they could fix it, but how could she trust them?

Her phone chirped: "AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical, making your world a better place!"

"Fuck. You." She slapped the phone down on her nightstand. Her hand lingered over the top drawer, where her purple battery-powered Friday Night Alternatives offered temporary relief, but she wasn't sure if her extra teeth might slide out and damage it. Not worth the risk.

The best gift she could give herself was to stay in bed. She hadn't missed a Sibs checkup since she was twelve. Nearly two decades of perfect monthly attendance had to afford a little leeway. Her eyelids sank. Maybe her body planned to grow more teeth and needed to shut down every other process to make it happen. She already had the day scheduled off from Jumpies for her Sibs checkup. Why bother with either? Why not sleep?

The sky grayed; she felt it at brief moments of wakefulness, but she didn't fully open her eyes until early evening dimmed the windows, when her door snapped open on squealy hinges.

There were people in her apartment.

She sat up fast and faced a rubbery gas mask. A man's tired eyes watched behind thick glass portholes. He wore a yellow suit with black rubber gloves and matching boots, and he seemed to fill the world. A scream caught in Yaya's throat as scrambled off the bed and made to run, but the man caught her arm and thrust her into the loveseat in one smooth twist. She couldn't make herself stand. "This good enough?" the man asked. His voice came clear despite the gas mask. Another man in a similar suit stood behind him and tapped at a phone.

A third hazard suit carried a black bag by the door. "It's fine," she said, her tone pert.

Yaya knew that voice. She'd heard it honey-coated inside Pandora's Aquarium on Friday night. She'd heard it sink into moans.

"Doc?"

5

Doc froze, as if trying to avoid being seen, and then pulled her gas mask off and let the yellow hood down. Her eyes were so pale blue that they bordered white, and a thin grimace crossed her ashen face. She looked so alien in this disgusting yellow shade, Yaya might have blamed any resemblance on Friday's tipsy fog if not for those pale eyes.

"It's fine," Doc said, her voice like taut sinew. She turned to the gas mask man who was still playing on his phone. "Confirm subject's identity." As if she didn't already know. Maybe she'd had enough to drink Friday that she couldn't remember.

Except Yaya had that text message.

"Pulling the East Newark Medical Station record now, Doc," Phone Boy said.

Yaya's Sibs station. That meant these goons worked for AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical. Doc was one of them.

Yaya settled into the loveseat cushion and turned to Doc. They knew each other; Yaya could charm her way out. "Okay, I get it," she said. "I missed my appointment. You could've called."

Doc glanced at the other goons as if she knew a secret.

Phone Boy tapped his screen, and it flashed blue beneath his mask. "One hundred percent match. Yolanda Betancourt, born on Long Island, New York, white female, black hair, complete heterochromia with one blue, one hazel, five feet, five inches, one hundred and fifty pounds—"

"Write me up an online dating profile, why don't you?" Yaya snapped.

"I've heard enough. Let's not make this more awkward than it has to be." Doc snapped her fingers. "Strip from the waist down."

Yaya blinked. "What the hell for?"

"Pelvic exam."

"That won't make this less awkward." Yaya didn't move. "You examined my pelvis pretty thoroughly Friday night."

Phone Boy and Tough Guy glanced at Doc, whose scowl sank into her face. She rooted inside her bag and drew out a pair of narrow silver scissors, the blades pinched into a mean point. "Hold her down," she said.

Tough Guy stepped around the loveseat, grabbed Yaya's arms, and pulled them back. She strained against his grip, but he was stronger.

Doc slipped between bed and loveseat, scissors gleaming in the gray light.

Tough Guy's breath chugged through his gas mask. "Kid, quit fighting. You've been seeing us your entire life—"

"Since I was a tween," Yaya cut in.

"—and we know you better than you know yourself."

"Doing anything fun with that?"

Doc opened the scissors. "We're making your world a better place. Just try to relax. Tell me the last dream you remember."

The squirming tore through Yaya's middle, same as at Sunnyside Fertility. "Hands off me," she coughed. "I'm saying no. No permission. I have rights!"

"Read her rights," Tough Guy said.

"Oh, sure." Phone Boy scrolled down his phone's screen. "Yolanda Betancourt, under the Double-Zero Virus Congressional Settlement, all chimera designate genetic data is the partial property of AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical. Truancy from your scheduled mandatory appointment deprives corporate representatives of their due right to inspect the continued viability of registered intellectual property." He sounded proud of himself.

Proud of what they were doing. Yaya twisted from the hunting scissor blades. "It's my body!" she shouted. Tears slid down her cheeks; for some reason, she hated ABP more for that than anything.

Doc never looked at Yaya while bent over the loveseat, her eyes aimed only at her silvery scissors. She wasn't going to stop. Her mind had stuffed their weekend encounter into a drawer somewhere. Yaya was only company property right now.

She swallowed hard. Her dignity tasted acidic. "Can we at least do this in private?" she asked. "Please?"

Doc paused. Her scissors snipped air, and she stood up straight. "Privacy."

"Like in the Sibs station." Yaya's eyes pleaded. *Like Friday night.*

The light shifted in Doc's eyes, protocol and familiarity tipping the scales. She snapped her fingers. "Bathroom."

Tough Guy let go of Yaya's arms. They slid boneless down the loveseat. Doc's scissors aimed at the bathroom doorway, bag at her side. She blocked the front door so Yaya couldn't rush into the hall and escape.

"Per protocol," Phone Boy said. "Doc, considering your personal history, your handling this might be inappropriate."

Doc stared at him, considering. Yaya looked to her with wide eyes, desperate for one more scrap of mercy. She needed Doc to repeat for Phone Boy that it was fine if she examined Yaya and that if he had a problem, he knew where to shove his phone.

But Doc's sympathy had run dry. She was at work, and Yaya was a chimera.

Doc aimed her scissors at Tough Guy and held out her bag. "Aziz," she said. He approached, took bag and scissors, and opened the bathroom door.

Yaya thought of kicking Doc on the way into the bathroom, but lashing out wouldn't help, and the kick wouldn't be that strong anyway. She slipped into the bathroom, the sink cluttered with bottles of lotion and leave-in conditioner.

"I don't know how you can poke around in there like it's nothing," Phone Boy said.

"Because nothing's all it is, you troglodyte," Aziz said, following Yaya inside and closing the door.

Yaya wanted to retort, but her tongue fizzled. She needed a second wind that wasn't coming and collapsed onto the toilet lid. Aziz loomed, bag in one gloved hand, scissors in the other, an unspoken threat that they were behind a closed door by protocol, nothing more. Now he waited for Yaya to undress as if it were nothing.

She took a deep breath. "Do you know what's wrong?"

Aziz set down Doc's bag with a leathery clunk. His gas mask huffed impatience. "This is important like you've no idea," he said. "Should've shown up, but now we do it here. Faster."

Yaya's snug lavender pants slid off her hips and crumpled around her ankles. She wished Doc were here. She might have dropped the cold mad scientist act and quit pretending they were strangers. Aziz's shoulders relaxed, and he knelt in front of Yaya.

Yaya pressed her back to the toilet tank. Her underwear slid down her thighs, the pad clear, the fastest menstrual cycle in her life. Her skin chilled.

"Can you help me?" she asked.

"Can't say." Aziz drew a speculum from the bag and torn off its plastic wrap. "Should we help you?"

"If you made the mess, yes. The whole 'you break it, you bought it' code is why you even have the Sibs stations." Muscles turned to tightropes beneath Yaya's skin from head to toe, and especially in private places between.

"Calm down," Aziz said. He couldn't understand; this would never happen to him. "Beginning procedure."

Yaya thought to make another comment, but her teeth clamped down on her lower lip. She was in enough trouble already. The speculum reached closer. Yaya stared down at Aziz's gas mask, bathroom light reflecting off its eye glass. She tried not to flinch, but the speculum was cold.

"Enhanced muscle growth," Aziz said. "Different."

Yaya opened her mouth to mention doing her Kegels, but realized she'd already made that joke to Ruby Kaur. Instead she whispered, "I'm scared, okay? I admit it. Can we talk about this?" The speculum pressed harder. Discomfort burst into sharp pain. "A little bedside manner, please?"

Aziz stuck to his task, even as a vibration climbed Yaya's spine. It almost sounded like a word in her head, but she couldn't quite make it out.

Aziz grunted. "Teeth, again."

Yaya swallowed. Again? Had this happened to others? The questions squirmed through her guts, a violent pulse racing down every muscle.

"Stop," she hissed.

Aziz ignored her. "Fully formed, almost bone surrounding."

What had Ruby said at the clinic? Jaw bone.

Squirming muscle spilled through Yaya's center, a cramp to end worlds. Aziz flinched back as a toothy red coil shot past Yaya's labia, out between her legs, and twisted around his neck. It tightened faster than he could cry out. He grabbed the coil in his free hand.

Yaya felt it. Her nerves knew the rubber of Aziz's crinkling suit, the fragility of his bones. She started to shout, but what to say? Help? Stop? A big mouth, all her life, and now her voice faltered the moment she needed it most. Another surge pushed out from between her legs. New fleshy coils blossomed, petals to a toothy flower. It snapped cobra-like toward Aziz's gas mask, a stalk of magenta-colored muscle, harsh jaws, and pearly teeth.

"Stop!" Yaya hissed.

Another vibration shot up her spine, and this time it did sound like a word. *Scared.*

Aziz's limbs went slack. The speculum clattered to the tile floor. Two coils lashed up Yaya's body, where one caught around the hem of her suit jacket. The other reached past her chest and slammed against her throat.

A fist beat at the bathroom door, but Yaya couldn't answer. Part of her body was turning into a dangerous animal, and if the ABP goons knocked down the door, they wouldn't make any distinction between her and what burst from her flesh.

Scared, the voice said again, a subtle hum.

Yaya grasped the coil at her neck. It wriggled wetly, and its toothy spines bit into her palm. How had they rushed out of her vagina without ripping her to shreds? They might tear her up on reentry.

She couldn't give them the chance. She doubled over, too close to the mouth stalk. Her fingertips prodded the floor. Cold tile. Damp bathroom rug. Useless speculum.

There—the scissors.

Scared.

Yaya didn't have time to loop her fingers through steel. She clutched the blades in a rising fist and then slammed down into the fleshy coil at her neck. It tore loose from her throat. Pain lashed up her body in a blinding shriek, as if she'd stabbed the scissor blades through one of her fingers.

The other coils sprang loose from her body and Aziz's neck. They folded protectively around the magenta mouth stalk, and before Yaya could brace herself for spines to rake tender flesh, the muscular mass slipped inside her. A not unpleasant tremor slid through her nerves.

Another fist pounded the bathroom door. "Aziz?" That was Doc. "Yaya?"

Aziz lay crumpled on his side, jagged holes dotting his suit's neck. Had the monster teeth bit him? Yaya hadn't noticed; she'd been too busy fighting for her own life.

The doorknob jiggled, and the fist turned angry. "Open up," Doc said.

Angry ABP goons outside the door, a threat both familiar and very real. If they took her, there would be no charming her way into a bathroom this time.

Yaya gritted her teeth and pulled up her pants. Her purse was on the couch, phone on the nightstand. The rest of her apartment stood on another planet right now, and she was here. She tucked the bloody scissors into her jacket's pocket and shoved open the window. It faced the street, a free drop, the building fire escape climbing outside the studio's main window.

No time to think. She clambered onto the toilet, put her legs through the window, and slid over the sill and down the brick. She would try to roll into it.

Her right leg gave a painful crack when she hit the concrete.

6

Tweezers in hand, Doc leaned over Aziz. He had regained consciousness and now sat on the rim of Yaya's bathtub, the neck of his hazard suit torn, his gas mask cradled in his lap.

"Is it bad?" he asked. A needle-shaped lump creased his neck. Only a white dot broke the surface, too small to pinch by hand.

"Hold still," Doc said. Steel pincers grasped the white dot and pulled.

The lump in Aziz's neck dotted blood as the splinter slipped free. Two inches long, either cartilage or another non-bone hard tissue. A shark's teeth sometimes tore loose inside their prey; this might have been similar. Doc slid the splinter into a plastic baggie. She then grabbed a bleach-stained hand towel, doused it in cold water, and handed it to Aziz.

"The hell is it?" he asked. He looked as if his daughter had scribbled red lines through the whites of his eyes.

"A quill," Doc said. "Strangest hickey you've ever had, I bet. And what did you say touched you?"

Aziz scrubbed at his neck. "Don't know. Vaginal tentacles?"

Yaya hadn't shown those in bed on Friday night. New samples of a unique specimen, that was how ABP would tabulate her, same as with Doc's work in Kentucky. She hadn't seen anything like that in nine years, unless she counted her nightmares.

She had stepped toward that high school with best intentions. She could not say the same for Yaya's apartment. Both warm and cold approaches seemed prone to failure.

Not that anyone else regretted the Kentucky Incident. ABP had their samples. That was all they would ever care about.

Greenwich crowded into the bathroom. "Phone call, Doc," he said. "It's the Board." He didn't need to specify which member. Three suits formed the ABP Board, but they only ever seemed to be one person, a triple-headed golden dragon ripped from old Godzilla movies.

"Agent Hall, speaking," Doc said, taking the phone.

"Private property management concerns," a monotone voice said. "Team member disarray. Reduced synergy. Development threat equals profit threat. Asset loss needs asset recovery."

A tornado of hammers pounded inside Doc's skull. She didn't want to think about team members, morale, or profits right now, and she shouldn't have had to when Human Resources and Accounts were separate departments.

“Are you done reading the automated report?” she asked. She watched Aziz stand uncomfortably and shamble out of the bathroom. “We only lost the one.”

“Asset loss needs asset recovery,” the Board said again.

She’d known their priorities before Greenwich handed her the phone, and the Board knew she knew. The call was solely to keep on her ass about it. Questions like *How?* and *Why?* never mattered.

“We’re pursuing all solutions,” Doc said. “Thank you, members of the Board.”

The line crackled. “All science needs a control group, Agent Docia Hall. Keep them under control.”

Control groups had nothing to do with keeping control. There would have needed to be a variable group and strict parameters, not an accidental poisoning of genetic material across the United States. The call ended without Doc having to explain this to the Board. They wouldn’t have cared anyway. They applied a stick to everyone below them as if ABP agents were piñatas full of good news.

She looked over her recent messages. Her team had spent the day asking questions and checking boxes, and not until after noon had they been alerted to target locations. Yaya wasn’t the only chimera to play hooky from her mandatory checkup today, just the last and most difficult. Had Doc been paying attention to names instead of serial numbers, she might have known in advance.

When the hammers in her head quit spinning, she tugged off her yellow hazard suit. The day was over, and she didn’t feel like wearing this banana peel one more minute. She tossed the black gloves into her bag.

The woman in the bathroom mirror looked exhausted and older than she should have, a blue vein splitting her pale forehead in two. Doc emerged from the bathroom carrying her bag and hazard suit. Greenwich held two phones in his hands, one his, the other likely Yaya’s. They would have had better luck tracking her had she taken it along, but then, their best luck would have kept them from losing her in the first place.

“I’m telling the lab to ready analysis on your sample,” Greenwich said. “If she jabs anyone else, we can monitor local healthcare, establish a grid. Asset loss needs asset recovery.” His cheery voice said he would make a proud mindless member of the Board someday.

Aziz still clutched the hand towel to his neck. His free fingers played with Yaya’s fridge magnets, all Looney Tunes characters. “Either of you up for Thai?” he asked, setting Marvin the Martian beside Duck Dodgers, their greens having faded to sickly yellow.

“Lord, yes,” Greenwich said. In the dim apartment, the phones cast a blue glow across his gas mask’s glass eyes.

“Royal Thai does dine in,” Aziz said, turning from the fridge. “Not too far from here, and traffic should be dying down afterward.”

Doc couldn’t stomach thoughts of food or co-workers another minute. “I’m packing it in,” she said. “You two enjoy yourselves.”

Downstairs, she tucked her hazard suit into the trunk of her car, wished Aziz and Greenwich a good night, and pulled onto the street. Casual Ishtar sang their new hit single “Queens of Heaven and Earth” as the radio popped to life. Doc’s eyes fell on a graffiti mural of twin girls, staring with a haunted amber gaze. The letters beneath them spelled Gemini, Doc’s zodiac sign, and though she didn’t believe in horoscopes and astrology, the mural helped her take a deep breath. This, too, would pass.

Southbound traffic was garbage. The delay gave frustrated thoughts time to marinate. Yaya seemed twitchy, her feelings internalized. She probably believed this inspection was personal, vengeance for leaving on Saturday morning. Doc hadn’t been surprised when Yaya took off, some women were like that. Her attempted call was a pleasant surprise, maybe a second chance. But then, second chances had an expiration date, and this one had died the moment it turned out Yaya was the target.

She was unique. This growth wasn’t benign tissue, like in today’s other chimeras. Hers was muscular, prehensile, the development of new anatomy. The Board took finding a genetic outlier as silver lining to the entire Sibs situation. If it could happen once, nine years ago in Kentucky, it could happen again here. They would upend the Earth to find Yaya.

She was in trouble, and being hunted and threatened turned a person into an entirely different beast. Yaya was trying hard to stay human right now. For how long could she manage?

Doc’s car eventually broke through rush hour traffic. She reached Green Street and crossed the Leeds intersection, beyond which her apartment building stood between others, brick facing brick across narrow alleys. Skeletal trees dotted the sidewalk. Somewhere nearby, their sister trees clustered in Avery Park, just as skeletal but perhaps less lonely.

Doc parked on the street three cars down from her building’s front. A few short steps climbed to the front lobby door. It hung ajar this evening, the door failing to sink all the way into its doorframe, meaning anyone without a code could wander in. Doc yanked it shut behind her, fist squeezing her keys. She would have to call the super about that in the morning.

Someone was holding the elevator on Doc’s floor. She didn’t feel like waiting and took the stairs. The elevator looked empty when she emerged from the stairwell and passed it, the holder having moved on. She followed the

carpeted hallway toward her door, 4C. Her keys loosened between fingers in a soft jingle.

She had already unlocked both deadbolt and doorknob lock before she noticed the limping footsteps. They had already reached her back.

An arm slung over one shoulder from behind and pressed her own gleaming scissors to her neck. When she swallowed, her throat grazed one blade, a warning in steel.

Yaya's voice warned with it. "Two can play ambush, Doc. But what was it you said?" Hot breath curled in Doc's ear. "Oh right. Just try to relax."

7

Yaya's injured leg had scraped knives across her nerves every step from her apartment, every moment she sat on the southbound bus, every second she stood holding the elevator on Doc's floor. Waiting in ambush. The knives sharpened her to go through with it. She took Doc's purse and coat, ordered her to sit at the kitchen table, and then slumped against the wall not far from the apartment door, scissors aimed at her former hookup.

No, her hostage. "You won't scream," Yaya said.

Doc sat at the kitchen table and said nothing. Pale hair, skin, clothes, and eyes, as if she had plunged through bleach this morning to prove ABP's purity. The living room remained unchanged since Saturday morning, one wall bearing framed photos of Doc and people who must've been family, and yet the place felt colder, more alien.

Yaya's stomach rumbled, probably her tentacled friend again. It had been feisty since the bathroom. *Hungry*, it hummed.

Doc glanced from Yaya's sweat-stained face to the floor. "I can look at that leg."

"You a doctor now, Doc?" Yaya asked. "So busy. I didn't even know you were an ABP agent."

"How would you?" Doc asked. "You barely asked my name the other night."

"But you came for me."

Doc ignored the double entendre. "I've had a long day checking chimeras."

Yaya eyed the scissors. "Sure, I can't be the only one who got Sibs since last month. It's a zygote-eat-zygote world." She laid one arm across her good leg's bent knee. The other stretched out, aching across the shin. Not a break—she couldn't have walked at all then—but the sprain still hurt like hell.

Hungry.

"You need a hospital," Doc said. Her fingers drummed the table, used to tapping a phone screen. That phone probably lay in her purse or coat, now seated by the door.

"Is it Sibs?" Yaya asked, glaring across the room. "This thing inside me?"

Doc didn't answer. She leaned over the table as if waiting to hear more.

Yaya could oblige. She could talk without end if anyone ever asked. "Last month, my Sibs checkup, you ABP Frankensteins shot me up with something. They put this thing inside me, didn't they?"

"That isn't my department," Doc said.

“What’s your department then?” Yaya asked, her tone haughty. “Let’s have that talk we never had on Friday at Pandora’s Aquarium. The kind people usually have when they meet.”

“And you’re interested in what people usually do? I doubt that.” Doc would dodge questions and obfuscate answers the entire night, and then to the end of the world if needed.

Yaya didn’t have that long. “What do you do then? Door-to-door pelvic exams? Sibs checkup patrol?”

“Assessment,” Doc said.

Yaya shrugged. “Then assess me.”

Doc’s eyes seemed to shine across the room. “From what my colleague described, and what I pulled out of him? You’re unique. The double-zero virus is having a strange effect on your individual genetic makeup. No two people are identical, not even twins. Not even devoured twins.”

Yaya strained to make sense from that, but Doc’s words sounded like someone crumpling a paper ball to throw in the trash. “You have no idea what’s happening to me, do you?” Yaya asked.

Doc shrugged, white blazer crinkling at her shoulders. “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

Yaya wiped sweat off her forehead before it could trickle down her face and be mistaken for tears. “No answers, but you tinker in my life from start to finish.”

“We own half that life,” Doc said.

“Boo-fucking-hoo. You could have the half that’s this monster if I trusted you an inch.”

The voice hummed in Yaya’s head yet again. *Hungry.* She thought of punching her gut. She had to look to Doc like a frenzied animal batting at its cage bars, and maybe this tentacled thing felt the same about Yaya’s ribcage. Its twitching might put Doc on edge enough to help.

“What’s your plan with me?” Doc asked. “Any next step?”

“Waiting,” Yaya said. She pressed her free hand over her lower abdomen.

“That’s it?” Doc’s tone struck an unusual high note. “Sit with me and hope it all comes together, is that all?”

“You can’t expect me to have my life figured out. I’ve never existed before.” Yaya stirred, gut squirming. “I didn’t know where else to go.”

Doc drummed her fingers again. “You have to sleep sometime, Yaya.”

Yaya glanced at the bedroom. “So do you.”

A cold quiet sank between them. This apartment had felt welcoming on Friday night. Yaya wondered how different this evening might have gone had

she stayed a little longer on Saturday morning and eaten breakfast with Doc, gotten to know each other that way instead of through dentata-driven panic.

"Research can help you," Doc said. She didn't look at Yaya now. "You would have to come to the lab with me, agree to tests, but there's a chance we can figure this out."

ABP had never lifted a kind finger in Yaya's life. She shook her head.

Doc ran a hand through her short white hair. "You don't have any reason to trust the company, but trust me. You liked me on Friday, remember? You weren't drunk when we came back here. You felt safe with me."

Friday night was still foggy. Doc had been interesting, and sometimes when you were miserable, tipsy, and horny, interesting was enough to forego complete trust. Yaya had gone with her gut. Now her gut was home to this other thing. Sure, her vagina was the exit, but every slithering motion felt systemic, both everywhere and nowhere. Her organs had to be shifting to accommodate. Or bursting.

Its voice hummed in her head again. *Hungry. Give sweet.*

"Stop," Yaya whispered.

Doc heard anyway. "I'm offering a hand."

"You're offering a drill to my skull and a knife to my womb," Yaya said.

Fire itched between her shoulders as the voice rattled up her spine. *Peanut butter, drunk girl.* These had to be the misfired thoughts of a stroke. Sibs was splitting her brain in two. That probably wasn't how strokes worked, but Yaya wasn't sure. *Peanut butter.*

"Do you have peanut butter?" she asked.

Doc glanced at the kitchen and then offered her first smile. "May I leave the table?"

Yaya nodded. If she gave the voice what it wanted, maybe it would stop. She watched Doc disappear into the kitchen. A drawer slid open and shut, and then hinges creaked twice.

"Did you want it as a sandwich?" Doc asked.

"Leave the bottle," Yaya said.

Doc strode around the kitchen corner and turned to the wall beside the door. One hand held a large peanut butter jar with a blue lid. The other held a shiny spoon. Yaya didn't think her own utensils ever looked so clean. Doc passed the spoon into the same hand as the jar and held it out for Yaya to grab.

"I can't have it being said that I'm a poor hostess," Doc said. "Not even while held hostage."

Yaya couldn't help a smirk. This was more like the Doc she remembered from Friday, at least in hazy fragments. She reached for the jar with her free

hand. Her guts rumbled, and she gave a silent promise that yes, she was feeding them.

She felt the syringe in Doc's hand before she saw it. A flick of the wrist and it appeared between Doc's fingers, hidden partway by the spoon at first. Drops of what was likely some sedative fell to the carpet as the needle dove toward Yaya's arm.

Yaya grasped at Doc's wrist to stop it. The needle rushed closer, almost to Yaya's neck. Doc's pale eyes never turned wrathful, ever calm and deliberate as she pushed. She was stronger. Only slightly, but enough. She would pierce Yaya's skin and knock her out.

Tension seized every muscle. A sharp pain shot between her legs, intestines unspooling down, up, over her waistline.

Red wet ropes snapped tight around Doc's wrist. Her hand bent upward, and its fingers splayed in all directions. The syringe spun to the carpet. Doc's mouth hung agape, her gaze locked on the constricting tentacles. No mouth emerged this time. It didn't need to; Yaya heard the thrum in her head speak with her. She aimed the scissors at Doc's hand.

Do it again, lose a finger. "Do it again, lose a finger."

Doc nodded, and the ropes of flesh uncoiled from her wrist. She dropped the peanut butter jar and spoon on the floor and tucked both arms against her chest in retreat. Her face sank, all attention poured into her wrist.

Yaya let go of the scissors and grabbed the jar. Her spoon dug greedily. It was the crunchy breed of peanut butter, not her preference, but the voice went quiet after the first spoonful. Maybe instead of the tentacled monster, she was hearing her subconscious, no longer letting her ignore basic protein needs. Parts of her body clearly didn't approve of how she'd been running my life. They had grown minds of their own, from brainstem to pelvis, so they could figure out a better path.

Hence grabbing Doc's arm and stopping the syringe.

"I wouldn't really do that," Yaya said after the tenth spoonful. "Your finger —I didn't mean it."

Doc didn't look up, still rubbing her wrist. She was scared now. Yaya was scared, too, same as the voice in her head was scared. All that feared mixed together in a toxic brew would surely melt the flesh off this situation's bones.

Yaya had felt the tentacle squeeze hard. She would have done the same with her hands had they not been distracted. "Dirty trick, Doc," she said.

"If examining you meant just us, I wouldn't have sent Aziz," Doc said. Her voice rattled, a ship come loose from its harbor in the night. "And I would have been more understanding. You're funny and beautiful, and it was a pleasure to

take you home last time. But my job is my responsibility. That examination wasn't personal."

"You made that pretty clear." Yaya tapped spoon against scissors. "You were steel."

Doc went on staring at her hand. The fingers bent as if holding her scissors. "It was easier to pretend we've never met. Isn't that how you do it? Cut and run the next morning?"

"What are they planning next?" Yaya asked. "Don't lie."

Doc drew in a long breath and let it out. "If I'm absent tomorrow, they'll wonder why. They'll call. They'll send someone."

Yaya spooned another helping of peanut butter. "But if I let you go, you're responsible, right? You're dutybound to help them. What then?"

"They'll hunt you." Doc cleared her throat and tried again. "We'll hunt you."

"And that's what you call making my world a better place."

The same sharp look in Doc's eyes that had drawn Yaya in the first place now shot icicles down her spine. Doc really believed this. She didn't need scissors when she was ABP's scalpel. Steel, through and through.

And she was telling the truth about the hunt. The cops might already be trawling Newark in their tanks at ABP's instruction, backed up by another squad of gas mask-clad goons.

Either brand of misery would land Yaya deep inside one of ABP's labs at the heart of their tallest glassy skyscraper. She would then be diagnosed if lucky, stuffed into some giant ABP terrarium, maybe fashioned like Yaya's tiny apartment. Dissected if she was unlucky, a carved turkey on some mad scientist's slab. Every minute she spent holed up instead of wandering the street was time toward saving her life.

She set down the peanut butter jar, half-empty now, and expected every spoonful to show at her hips within the hour.

There were worse fates.

8

Yaya let Doc wander the apartment, doing everything she'd need to do on ordinary nights—fetch leftovers from the fridge, wash up, sit on the couch and stare, and eventually go to bed. Yaya didn't let Doc get close again.

When the bedroom door finally shut and the bed creaked with Doc's weight, Yaya crept to standing. She would've liked a shower, but Doc might escape then. Yaya kept the scissors in one hand when she used the toilet in case Doc opened the bedroom door and tried to slip by. Snoring soon rang from the bedroom. Either Doc was faking or she had stressed herself to sleep.

Yaya could relate. All that peanut butter made her sluggish. She stripped down to her black top and underwear and reclined across the couch. With her period having ended as suddenly as it arrived, at least she didn't have to worry about staining more of Doc's furniture.

If Doc woke up in the middle of the night—Yaya had to hope that wouldn't happen. Her leg ached less now, but she didn't trust it to close the distance if Doc made a mad dash out the apartment door.

The voice rattled. *Peanut butter*.

Yaya jammed the back of her head against the couch arm, hoping that would be answer enough. Her gut growled, and she pictured tentacles entwining her stomach. She still craved protein, but she wasn't standing on her bad leg again just because her vagina monster was hungry. Besides, if she ate any more of that stuff tonight, she was going to throw up.

And tomorrow? She'd never been good at planning that far. The creature inside shared her nervous system; they felt each other's pain. Did that make them one creature? But they had two voices, two minds. The tentacles acted on their own, independent as her heartbeat.

Confirmation of Sibs then, dividing her? A parasite that ABP had injected into her blood? Doc had mentioned Yaya's unique quality. Flattering, but right now uniqueness was both obvious and dangerous, a target on Yaya's chest, nothing better. She looked down at herself as if she expected to see red rings between her breasts, a bullseye in the center. Once ABP had claimed rights to half, they might as well have declared manifest destiny on everything.

Her only power was to raze her earth with unapologetic promiscuity, junk food, and heavy alcohol use. Now, something else owned her, too. She had tasted control when she pulled scissors on Doc, but even violence came from desperation, no different than a snared coyote forced to chew off its leg to survive. The whole day had been a bear trap, its jaws clamping on Yaya's life.

A peaceful Yaya would've never jammed scissors against anyone's neck.

~

Her eyes shot wide open. It was still dark, still night. She hadn't realized she'd fallen asleep.

Scared.

Her spine burned, and everything else itched. She limped into the bathroom and slid the door shut. A twinge shot through her limbs, worst in her injured leg.

If she left her underwear seated over her lower body, she could pretend everything was fine. Out of sight, out of mind—except she could still feel movement below, and it didn't feel right. She had to look. She stretched the waistline toward the sink, swallowed hard, and peered down.

Dark curls parted to either side of a slender crease, climbing just past the lower edge of her mons pubis. To anyone else, she might've had a taller vulva than usual, but she knew her body better than any doctor or corporate goon. Her outer labia shouldn't climb this high.

She waited for her body to unzip and organs to spill out, but the crease didn't climb any higher. Not yet, anyway. How long until Sibs split her down the middle, a genetic axe chopping her in half? Time was running out for the planet Yolanda.

Scared, the voice said again.

Fire tore across Yaya's back. Cold bathroom tiles against her feet didn't help, but water would. She tore off top and underwear, clambered over the tub's lip, and laid herself inside. Her leg couldn't handle any more trauma right now, still swollen and purple from the jump out her apartment's bathroom window.

She reached over her shoulders and twisted the cold water and shower knobs, raining ice across her back. Every drop stung, but the fire shrank. Her swollen leg seemed to like the cold, too.

Everything itched between her legs where, hours ago, a mass of muscle and bone had pushed through and wrapped around an ABP goon's neck. Had her vagina killed him? Ludicrous, but she'd seen the coils with her own eyes, and now the skin took on a pinkish tinge as if infected.

Scream, the voice hummed, and then a high-pitched mewling filled Yaya's head.

"What's the matter with me?" She thrashed at the back of her head, where damp hair tangled around her fingers.

Me. Me. Me.

The sound reminded Yaya of when a character on Looney Tunes was

readying to sing, and she giggled for a split-second.

The voice giggled back. *Scared.*

Yaya arched her spine, letting ice water run across her face and down her neck. The voice wasn't in her mind. She heard it, a thrum that climbed her spine and tickled her inner ear, an intimate whisper from somewhere inside her body. That meant she wasn't losing it. One less thing to worry about in this nightmarish evening.

Squirming filled her lower abdomen. *Scared*.

She glared down. "Me fucking too."

The voice didn't acknowledge her. *Scared. Scared.* The squirming ramped up to eleven, her guts full of worms. She felt them coming this time—spiny tentacles poured from between her legs. A cramp forced her back against the tub basin, and ice rained across abdomen and legs.

They slithered out surrounding a muscly stalk, and then their bulk blossomed into a flower, red coils for petals and magenta jaws at their center. Yaya opened her mouth to shriek, but two red arms snaked up her middle and lashed around her neck. Her fingers dug underneath them, but her nails only scraped her own skin. Bony spines poked against her throat. Had Doc been this —

Scared. Scared.

—with scissors against her neck?

The flower of muscle opened its jaws and rammed against the tub basin, smearing magenta streaks across the porcelain. Tentacles slapped at the rim, their spines snagging the shower curtain. The rod slid loose from the walls and clattered across Yaya.

She glanced past it to the door. Her clothes sat bunched against the couch, scissors in her lavender jacket's pocket, far away and useless. She didn't want this thing to kill her, or to hurt Doc, but how to stop it?

Scared. Scared.

Teeth slammed the tub again. This thing had no eyes, no visible way of breathing. Did it know it was choking her? It brought constant thrashing chaos, a frightened animal caught in a trap. Its body; her body—this flesh didn't belong to her and never had.

"Yaya?"

Doc stepped halfway into the bathroom, wearing a gray tank top and pajama pants and a green silky robe, face scrunched in sleepiness. Her tired eyes widened, taking in fallen shower curtain rod, drenched and naked Yaya, and the thing that writhed between her legs.

She wanted to tell Doc it felt worse than it looked, but she didn't think she

could speak again. Whatever thrashed from her vagina, it was terrified. They all had that in common.

Doc darted from the doorway. She would run screaming from the apartment and call the police—no, that didn't sound like her. She would call ABP. The gas mask gang would pull up in minutes to collect their unique specimen.

Yaya glared at the whips of flesh. Her voice came choked. "You're killing us."

The bathroom door banged against the wall as Doc rushed back inside, her robe discarded. She raised one arm, thumb planted over a syringe's plastic plunger.

Yaya tried to sit up. *No.* "No!"

"It's okay," Doc said. "Settle down, and tell me the last dream you remember." The needle gleamed in the bathroom's bright light. She lunged at the bathtub.

One fleshy coil lashed across the fallen shower curtain and whipped Doc's hand. The syringe went flying.

Doc didn't watch its descent. Her eyes fixed on the bathtub. "I'm trying to help," she muttered. She crept closer, into the range of angry flesh ropes. Her eyes flitted back and forth, taking careful measurement. "Breathe. Stop fighting."

Yaya didn't know how, but she tried. The coil around her neck was not as tight as it felt; she took a deep breath, gut puffing up so that for a second she couldn't see the muscle snaking between her legs.

Doc's cautious fingers crept down the tub's sides toward Yaya's waist and the red mess. Yaya tensed—this touch was too familiar and yet still strange. Thin red limbs coiled around Doc's forearm, but she made to pet the muscle. It gave wet, smacking sounds, as if readying to bite her. Tongue-like flesh, soft and sensitive, sank beneath her fingertips.

Lightning forked through Yaya's nerves, her flesh raw where it formed the muscled stalk. Judging by the source, she couldn't be too surprised. She'd read once that she had nine thousand nerves in her clitoris. If it had gained sentience, how upset would it be with her?

Warm muscle shuddered through her. *Scared.*

"It keeps repeating the same thing," Yaya said. "Scared, over and over."

Doc looked from the muscle to Yaya and back. "You hear a voice?"

"Bugs Bunny should've taken a very left turn at Albuquerque." Yaya giggled to herself, and she didn't realize how much she needed to laugh after everything she'd been through the past few hours. Or was it days? Maybe it had

been her whole life, one long ordeal leading to this night. She would need a lot of jokes for that.

"Is this part of you or something inside you?" Doc asked. "Is there a name?"

How did she know to ask these questions? She seemed to handle finding a vagina monster in her bathroom just fine. Maybe Yaya would've handled it better too if it had grown from someone else.

Doc looked at her fingers, now tinged with pinkish fluid. "Magenta," she said. "Magenta, hush now. We won't hurt you. No one's going to hurt anybody. Right, Yaya?"

"It's lashing at you," Yaya said.

Doc petted the muscle. "Maybe it knows me from Friday."

"It doesn't have eyes."

Doc shushed through her teeth at both Yaya and the stalk. "Up until five hundred million years ago, nothing born on this world had eyes. Life got on just fine without them. Magenta will, too." One flesh whip slashed inches from her nose, too close to her left eye.

"It'll blind you, too," Yaya said.

"The voice sounds like an it?" Doc asked.

"I didn't ask my vagina its pronouns, if that's what you're getting at." Yaya swallowed every frustrated thought at the unreality, nonsense, wrongness. Everyone's parts were different. Hers took that philosophy to the extreme. "It's —she's me. All me."

"The two brains myth," Doc said.

"Barely got one to go around." Yaya tried clenching her abdominal muscles to draw the monster back inside, back where it couldn't hurt anyone, but it ignored her.

So did Doc. She went on stroking Magenta's stubborn muscle, and her voice took on a peaceful lilt. "Back before we knew better, we thought some dinosaurs had two brains. Their skulls were too small to hold all the functions they needed for such big bodies, or so paleontologists speculated. Some of those dinosaurs had a cavity in their pelvic bones, perfect for a small, secondary brain. It would send and receive from the hind quarters and then pass everything up the spine to the cranial brain. We know better these days. That was just a bone cavity, and at best it housed a nerve cluster, nothing more complex."

The tentacles slowed, their frantic lashing winding down to gentle waves.

"But what if it could happen?" Doc asked. "The spinal column is full of nerves, and they reach from top to bottom and all through the body. Why not a brain down there? If Magenta has her own voice, then she might have her own

consciousness, grown down your spine. Take that organic structure away from a tiny-brained sauropod. Now give this mythical second brain to a mammal, with the intelligence that entails."

Magenta hissed, as if about to say *Scared* again, but instead the humming voice melted into a purr. Doc's voice was soothing her.

Yaya reached between her legs and petted the base of the stalk. "Hush now," she said. "It'll be okay." Her fingers crossed Doc's at the stalk's middle.

Red coils slithered back from Doc's forearm and loosened from Yaya's neck. Magenta's teeth quit scraping porcelain. A calm washed through Yaya's nerves, almost like Doc was cradling her. Nerves tied her to Magenta, fear to fear and calm to calm.

"Be a good creature," Yaya said, watching the muscle settle beneath her fingers.

Doc gave a tired smile. "She is."

Won't hurt you. "I won't hurt you." If they were each talking to Doc, then fine. But if Magenta had meant she wouldn't hurt Yaya, then she didn't understand their situation. Yaya leaned her head back. "Sibs is like a chimera's body filing for divorce against itself."

Doc shook her head. "I've never heard of Sibs like this." Her fingers twitched, as if Yaya's skin were a piano she wanted to play.

Yaya couldn't argue with what Doc had heard, but she doubted either of them had a better explanation for Magenta. That two brains myth would play into Sibs if Yaya's brain were dividing, but her uniqueness wouldn't help her. She needed precedence.

"You knew to calm her," Yaya said. "This ever happen before?"

Doc didn't answer, only asked, "Do you believe in second chances?"

She was asking Yolanda Betancourt, the woman too proud to call a date twice. But deep down, yes, Yaya wanted believe.

Doc's face hung over the rim of the tub. Her smile was radiant. "She's kind of like having an extra tongue, huh? A horned, toothy tongue."

"Horns?" Yaya lifted her head and glanced down her body. Sure enough, two black horns curled forward from either side of the tender, muscly stalk. The next time Magenta made to snap at someone, she might gore them first. "I didn't even feel them when we slipped out. When she slipped out."

She didn't feel the horns when they slipped inside either. Magenta's limbs and teeth slid back between Yaya's thighs and nestled up inside her, rubbing against delicate tissue and sending shockwaves through her nerves. She breathed deep at each tremor. Doc followed Magenta until her fingertips tapped the sensitive folds between Yaya's thighs, just beneath her pelvic bone, triggering a flashback

to Friday night in the split-second before Doc drew away.

Yaya was suddenly freezing. Doc must have noticed; she reached past Yaya's head and shut off the icy rain. Cold water droplets dotted her forearms. Yaya looked the same down her chest, belly, arms, legs. Her once-curly hair had plastered against her scalp and back, and each dripping lock sent a chill down her spine. Her teeth began to chatter.

Doc helped Yaya to standing. She shifted in an awkward semi-circle, leg aching less now. Her lips opened and closed, trying to think of something funny to break the tension, maybe spit sarcasm to throw off any questions, but her wit had frozen. Nothing she said tonight would make herself or Doc feel any better.

Doc offered Yaya's tank top and underwear. She was looking at Yaya, both of them stone-faced, the air growing silent and still.

A fog slid at the edges of Yaya's mind, and it carried memories it had obscured since Friday night. She and Doc, standing like this, one clothed, one naked, a look in Doc's eyes, piercing through a tipsy haze. Or had they both been drunker than that? Didn't matter now. Drunk, sober, tipsy, Doc's place, tumbling, okay sex, a long sleep curled in each other's arms—Friday was a lifetime ago.

And yet standing here with Doc, that history felt ready to repeat itself.

~

At each step from bathroom to bedroom, Doc felt hands helping to peel away her pajamas. Already naked, Yaya had it easy. Doc's pants somehow tangled in her bedframe when she tried to crabwalk back onto the mattress, and she laughed while Yaya untangled her.

Yaya then climbed on top, and they both tangled in the sheets. A fire crackled through her trunk and across the bed, cooking Doc's skin to sweating. How could it be November around this summer day?

She wasn't being careful. There was no telling what Yaya was like right now, what Magenta's influence would mean for this moment. Doc was letting this happen—no, worse, encouraging it. There was wrongness and danger here. Was she just going to ignore that?

No, she wasn't. The danger only pressed her back harder into the mattress. If she was allowed one terrible decision this year, let it be this.

"What's it like?" she whispered. Her breath cast a soft wave through Yaya's curls.

Yaya trembled, a darkness spreading from between her legs. "Like I feel every part of myself. Nerves everywhere, muscles hard. I can flex my entire

body, one big bicep. Every sensation is ten thousand kisses." She laid a kiss on Doc's neck. "And being firebombed."

Doc took a deep breath. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You can't." Yaya began to sit up, hands running from Doc's chest to her slender hips. "Are you sure?"

Like all of the proudest people, Yaya's heart seemed a shrine to self-doubt. And Magenta? She was a mystery. But deep between them, they cared.

Doc hadn't expected that. She sat up toward Yaya's face. "I'm sure, yes. Are you?"

Yaya planted a kiss on Doc's lips, the surface gentle, and yet hard muscle pounded like a heartbeat behind them. A quiver ate through every corner of Doc's body. She drew Yaya back down and kissed between her neck and jaw. Yes, she was sure, they were sure, and they were doing this. Last time, caution had reigned. Their fingers had crept past lines of intimacy until Yaya's head sank between Doc's legs, until Doc's hand found the hair beneath Yaya's broad waist and dipped downward. They had kept a few inches of distance between their bodies.

Now they grasped and plunged. The bedroom air sweltered with primordial heat, Yaya's fresh changes summoning extinct summers. In some places, her skin burned at the touch.

Doc held on anyway. Her mind sank deeper, happier, at every kiss, stroke, inch of pressure. The darkness from beneath Yaya spread across Doc's lower legs, her thighs, her hips. Not holding, only exploring. Magenta's horns pressed at Doc between her legs, opening her to that muscled stalk. Teeth grazed the inner thigh.

A sharp pain made Doc wince. "Not so rough," she said.

"She's sorry," Yaya said. "We're sorry."

Doc took a breath and blew into Yaya's damp curls. Below, Magenta was moving again, her wet limbs a conduit for static electricity. Every stroke sent a tingling jolt through Doc's blood. Where did one anatomy end and the other begin? She couldn't think to care right now. Friday night, when fingers stroked inside Yaya, Doc remembered brushing something hard and rough, what she had mistaken for birth control. Only now did she realize those must have been Magenta's teeth.

They had already crossed paths at an intimate moment in the past. There was precedent to cross again.

Doc let out a long, slow breath and sank into the bed again. That wet lightning flooded over her not as if surging from the foot of the bed, but as if she were hanging upside-down and Magenta's arms pooled across her body as an

inevitable matter of gravity.

Yaya's limbs held Doc, and Magenta's explored. Yaya's mouth kissed at Doc's neck; Magenta's mouth brimmed with thunderclouds and breathed a storm through Doc's nerves. Their touches melted together, a systemic lightning bolt binding two bodies—no, three. No, one. Doc couldn't tell anymore. Her heart quaked, anxious and then elated. The air itself squeezed, the room's pressure mounting in heat. Another bout of thunder rocked her body, and she clenched her toes at the bedsheet's corners.

If a miracle had made Magenta, then the storm she rode through Doc defied all universal law. She was never meant to feel this good. But pleasure wasn't a crime, and if it was, it would be Doc's favorite. The universe could bend for her, just this one night, and let time pool here in the bed's deep waters, an eternal murky November.

Mouth, muscle, heat.

Mouth, muscle, explosion.

Moaning, sighing.

"Magenta," Doc whispered without meaning to. One more lightning bolt rocked her into a sharp cry, and then a long, rattling sigh. She was sinking.

What the hell did she just do? A panicked quake told her to sit up, figure it out, question herself, question everything.

But that felt more like the reaction she was supposed to have than the honest truth. Off the clock, responsibility was dead. Yaya was just another woman, and so was Doc. She could fuck who she pleased.

She half-expected Yaya to clamber off the bed and out the door, but when their trips to the bathroom ended, she cuddled behind Doc. Darkness spread again between Yaya's legs as Magenta blanketed loving arms around Doc's middle.

The storm still brewed between them at every breath and heartbeat, but it sank in the calm of autumn rain. In that tranquil, thoughtless moment, Doc couldn't help honey pouring through her nerves one last time. She let out another frail moan before sweet sleep drew her into dreams.

two: peanut butter

9

Yaya kicked away blankets and stretched from Doc's bed, the baby blue sheets having been replaced by teal since their staining three days ago. November air wafted, chillier this morning, through a bedroom window. Doc must have opened it a crack before Yaya woke up. They had been roasting last night.

She pressed the window shut and let her brain sift through memories in the early light. Déjà vu set in. Doc lying asleep, white hair ruffled on a pillow. A maroon patch dried where Yaya had slept. Not her period showing up this time, but some Magenta-related residue. They would systematically ruin Doc's bedsheets one by one for each sexual encounter.

If they had another.

Last night had not been like Friday, her body plenty with the program and in ways she had never expected. Last night wasn't like any other time in her life. Full of strange sensations beyond Magenta, Yaya's head had been clear, doubtless, the moment not a quick shower in the middle of her mad dash from one encounter to the next, but an immersive bath. She'd wanted to be here. The difference made no sense—everything between Doc and herself since Friday had gone wrong—but self-doubt had evaporated the moment Magenta crawled over Doc's body and united their three as one.

Yaya didn't feel that sense of surety now. Standing over the bed, she knew she should leave. She'd run on Saturday partly because she always ran, but couldn't she blame ABP, too? Genes, monthly checkups, injection, teeth, Magenta—her life strained a short leash. Free will beneath their thumb was a joke, and she'd spent the punchline taking it on the chin like a champ.

If this Tuesday morning was Saturday's do-over, didn't she have the free will to choose differently? Doc had asked if Yaya believed in second chances.

For just a little longer, and against all sense, she could stay.

She reclined beside Doc, head on the other pillow. The maroon stain beneath her felt dry already. She would have to ask Magenta what it was, if Magenta even knew.

Sunlight crept deeper into the room, and Doc stirred from beneath the sheets. She turned slowly to face Yaya, her face stiff in unspoken and unexplained surprise to find herself not alone. The glint in her eyes made the wait worth it. Maybe things could be different.

Doc rolled over again and let her shoulders sink against Yaya's chest. "Your leg."

Yaya realized it hadn't ached when she stood minutes ago, and not while tangled with Doc last night. She glanced down.

A soft gray carapace now coated the once-swollen stretch of shin. Its surface shimmered, and exploratory fingertips found it brittle, a bug's frail exoskeleton that would harden over time. She wondered if the residue had seeped from her skin when it grew.

"Might be an adaptation," Doc said, her throat dry and raspy. "Your body knew what you needed and grew it for you."

That would explain Magenta's voracity, if she had anything to do with this. If Yaya so much as caught odd-colored chickenpox, she would suspect Magenta going forward.

Another blade of sunlight slashed across the room before Doc said, "They'll miss me if I don't go."

Yaya slid back so they were no longer touching. Doc was a hostage. Somehow that had slipped Yaya's mind. "Then go," she said, not unkindly.

She watched Doc rise, disappear into the bathroom, reappear, get dressed. A lot of trouble just to hide beneath a smelly hazard suit and gas mask, but that wasn't Yaya's business. She leaned back, eyes trailing down the bed. Her gut rumbled.

Doc paused beyond the footboard, midway through throwing on another white blazer. "There's no more peanut butter, so you'll have to scavenge," she said. "If you're hungry."

"Not me," Yaya said. Her mouth felt sticky. She needed to poke around for a spare toothbrush. "Maybe the monster."

"Magenta," Doc corrected. She finished getting dressed and then gave the bed a long stare, another unspoken and unexplained message rippling through the air.

She wouldn't tell. Not after last night. Whether through mercy toward Yaya or greed that she wanted Magenta all to herself when ABP took so much already, Doc's lips were sealed. She didn't even say goodbye when she stepped out of the apartment.

Yaya sank into the bed and thought about sleeping. All that protein yesterday, she needed more rest to digest. Her gut felt otherwise. It rumbled again.

"Fine, fine," she said, and clambered off the mattress. More peanut butter, but she was having a fruit or vegetable today if she could get her hands on it.

In the bathroom, she found a spare toothbrush behind the boxes of pads and tampons, still bound in plastic. A little morning prep and she was ready to indulge hers and Magenta's appetites.

She paused one step from the bathroom door. Something nestled inside her

underwear. First thought, her tampon had come loose, except she wasn't wearing one. Magenta had made that impossible. Muscles had to be slithering out.

"Knock it off," Yaya said.

Magenta hummed. *Yowzah, drunk girl.*

Yowzah. That guy Bryant's word at Sunnyside Fertility, which meant Magenta had heard him on Saturday even while tucked up inside Yaya. Everything passed between them. Now Magenta seemed to be spilling out. If trying to escape, good riddance. She could take Sibs with her, if that was her source, and leave Yaya in peace.

Her abdominal muscles twitched with a bone-snapping crunch. Warm memories surfaced from childhood summers of Mountain Dew and snack food, back when she was a little girl who thought it was fun to see how many Fritos or pretzels she could stuff in her mouth at once. This crunch was the same, brittle and crumbling.

Except this sounded between her legs' jaws. "What the hell's going on down there?"

Magenta's voice slid into Yaya's ears, a sluggish boa constrictor engorged on an unfortunate goat. *Peanut. Butter.*

"Soon," Yaya said. "What's crunching inside me?"

Us.

Yaya snapped her underwear down to her knees and leaned her shoulders against the bathroom wall. Cool plaster nipped her skin. How long had that window hung open?

The cleft between her legs had climbed an inch higher since last night, almost past her dark pubic hair. By evening, would her bellybutton be cloven in two? Would she have a bellybutton at all?

"I want to know what's happening," she said. "It's my damn body, too."

Red coils prodded her vulva and then parted the curtained folds of skin. She expected Magenta to slide out, or at least the toothy flower bud she'd come to think of as Magenta. The parasite had shown herself to be much larger in bed with Doc last night.

White bone poked the edge of Yaya's vulva. Not Magenta; too cold and hard. When she emerged, Yaya felt both her cleft opening and the stalk's emergence, their nerves a shared network. This was a foreign object, maybe a stray bit of tampon that had caught up inside last month. It happened sometimes.

The object pressed forward ever so slightly. Yaya cupped her hand between her legs, readying to catch it.

A crumpled ball of tiny bones dribbled into her palm. Most had been snapped apart, and a sticky crimson residue held the pieces in a clump. The

original shape wasn't clear, but out stuck a narrow point that reminded Yaya of a beak.

A bird skull.

Her flinching hand dropped the bone ball, and it gave a soppy slap when it hit the bathroom tiles. Congealed bones spread in a puddle of Magenta's slime. Their posture reminded Yaya of dinosaur fossils set in the earth, and she thought idly of Doc's two brains lecture before a whining shriek spit through her clenched teeth. She lunged for the sink, blasted hot water, and scrubbed her hands red and raw.

And still the dead bird lay on the floor.

"Magenta?" Yaya asked. "When did you do it?"

Don't know, Magenta said. *I've never existed before. Can't expect me to have my whole life figured out.*

"Do you think you're funny? When?"

Before.

Before what? Before Yaya had woken up and discovered the open window, surely. A bird must have paused on the outer sill, only for a moment. How could it have expected one of those miserable tentacles to snap snakelike from inside and tug it up into Yaya's—

She gagged over the sink. Spit dribbled out, but no vomit.

Magenta's appetite was a pendulum, swinging between ravenous hunger and sleepy digestion, with Yaya carried along for the metamorphic ride. If those tentacles could reach that far, then they'd grown longer since last night and now likely crowded against Yaya's abdominal organs. If she still had those organs.

She balled up half a roll of toilet paper and tried to wipe up the dead bird. Bending down stabbed at her insides, but she managed to scoop slime and bone together and stuff the problem into the garbage pail.

"Magenta?" she said again, stern now. "No more birds. Unless it's cooked chicken."

No birds, Magenta said. More repetition, no telling whether or not she understood. *Peanut butter.*

"We'll see." Yaya's stomach rumbled. A phantom hunger, not hers, but haunting her gut. She needed to step outside. Maybe she'd be back when Doc came home, maybe not.

Yaya caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror. Her right eye was hazel, as usual, but her left eye's violet-wreathed blue now blinked a pinkish purple.

"Magenta," she whispered. One finger prodded around the eyeball's edge, as if her old iris color lay hidden in a cocoon of thick fluid. She wondered if

Magenta could see through from the far side.

She borrowed a pair of Doc's underwear, snug but better than re-wearing yesterday's. Yaya's lavender suit had seen cleaner times, but she had nothing else. She threw it on and then borrowed a spare winter coat from Doc's coat closet before heading out into the crisp November morning, destination unknown. Early pedestrians traveled the sidewalks, and commuting cars formed a steady stream past Doc's apartment building, filling Newark with occasional car horns and passing bus roars.

Jumpies would be calling soon. Whichever ABP goons held her phone would know where she worked, even if they hadn't broken her service's security. They had probably already known, though. They knew her life and owned half of it; the rest was extra. She had no money either, purse abandoned in her cramped apartment. Doubtful that ABP had walked away. Someone would be watching for her return, either a gas mask or a uniform cop.

She guessed a cop tank sat parked outside the Gemini graffiti mural nearby, and its cop had probably called the city in to clean it up. Back in the day, cops drove cars, often blue and white, before Yaya's teen years when late Secretary of Defense Heston had championed the need for more robust urban law enforcement vehicles and firepower. Too many cities were happy to oblige. TV had normalized brute strength, broadcasting most of the U.S. police action in former USSR states as a favor to Russia.

Yaya wondered what difference the broadcasts might have made had they played cartoons instead. Same result, likely. She remembered one Looney Tunes sketch riffing on *Dick Tracy*, where at the climax, Daffy Duck mowed down mobsters with a clattering Tommy Gun. She'd giggled fiercely, not because the massacre was funny, but because it seemed absurd that they showed a murderous duck to kids. No wonder she was so screwed up.

But she couldn't blame cartoons for cop tanks. Daffy Duck was innocent.

Her walk passed neighboring apartment buildings, a corner store that was dying out thanks to places like Jumpies, and a small deli. The last made her halt. Magenta had access to Yaya's every sense, and even if she didn't know what scent was, she detected roasting pork. Yaya's gut would start rumbling any moment.

"Well, what do you know." She felt the man's voice against her ear, his breath puffing past as he stopped beside her.

Bryant smiled through his beard. He looked much like he did on Saturday at Sunnyside Fertility Clinic, only now wearing a forest green beanie over his chestnut hair.

"You know, I call in for a mental health day, and when I stop here of all

places, I see you again," he said. "What are the odds?"

Yaya meant to keep side-eying him, but instead her body pivoted on the spot to face him. "Mental health day?" she asked. "You don't work retail, Bryant Peters."

"You remember. Last name, too."

She did, and she hated herself for it when she'd forgotten Doc's name on Saturday and dozens of others before. He wasn't special. He'd done nothing to deserve her rare moments of productive memory.

He chuckled, a warm sound that puffed white breath. "No retail; I'm in computers. Look, I know the street's not much better for asking a woman out than the fertility clinic, but after the other day's bungle—I don't know, this feels serendipitous."

"And what are you asking now?" Yaya couldn't guess why she was listening to him. This wasn't her usual. Their last meeting had been her usual, her tongue an icicle of disinterest. He hadn't been the first man to look at her when she didn't want, speak to her when she didn't want.

Bryant's eyes twinkled blue. "Walk with me. Talk with me, if you feel like it. We can head back to my place, hang out a bit. Get to know each other."

Yaya's blood didn't run hot to speak with him, and she didn't get those fuzzy idle thoughts she sometimes entertained when she saw a pretty woman. Whatever the buzz inside, she'd never felt it beside a man before. She couldn't be sure what she was doing.

She steeled her shoulders and stuck out her grandmother's proud chin. "I'm not sleeping with you."

That made Bryant laugh hard, and he raised his hands in surrender. "No strings, I swear."

"Then thank the sex gods."

His face screwed up at that, but he didn't let strangeness stop him. "You like coffee?" he asked.

"I tolerate coffee." Yaya pursed her lips and licked her teeth. "What to talk about?"

"Well." Bryant took the first step away from the deli and didn't take a second until he was sure Yaya stepped beside him. "How about your name?"

"M—Yaya."

"Just the one?"

"For now." Especially when Yaya couldn't seem to get the first straight. She had almost said Magenta. Someone in her gut wanted something and was going to poke and prod Yaya's brain to get it. That was fine. Magenta would stay busy, and the walk would keep her from eating any more birds.

10

Just before sunset, Yaya agreed to go home with Bryant. They had gone for coffee, visited the Newark Museum of Art, and wandered some benign darkness in Yaya's head, although that last locale might've been just for her and Magenta. After the invitation, they picked up a pizza and made the quick drive. His suburban neighborhood shot off from Riverside Avenue, but its street name lay obscured behind a bowing tree limb, its branches not yet skeletal. Every house seemed relaxed, their windows filled with warm light. Everyone who lived here could afford to slip away from the city's fresh skyscrapers, their properties already valuable and pre-gentrified.

The trees that bordered Bryant's yard came stunted and coated in needles, partway obscuring his house, a one-level with delusions of grandeur, so long and wide that it encroached on its own back yard. A pointed roof climbed just past the treetops. Yaya noted the windows bore curved patterns that might have been metal or wood, she couldn't tell. The lawn was neat and leafless.

"Big house for being in computers," she said, stepping out of the car. The pizza kept her hands warm against the chilly air.

"I diversify my portfolio," Bryant said, leading her to the front door. In the gloom, his beard seemed a separate creature that clung to his face.

He opened the front door, which led into a short, windowless hall, almost like an airlock, so that the cold outdoors never made direct contact with the warm indoors. A tiny nightlight glowed from a wall socket, the only illumination when Bryant closed the outside door.

Magenta was getting anxious, thinning Yaya's skin. Bryant passed to her left, a slow, broad shuffle that brushed against her arm. The moment between doors dragged on.

"Sorry," he said, and keys jangled in his hands. "Cluttered keyring."

Light flooded the "airlock" as the inner door opened. Yaya kept to Bryant's heels until she stepped through.

A ten-foot ceiling, broken only where pillars climbed, but they looked more decorative than structurally necessary. The living space was all apiece—living room, dining room, kitchen—much like Yaya's, except this place could swallow three of her apartments, never mind the back halls that must've led to bathrooms, bedrooms, and office. Abstract art decorated each wall, set into black frames. No photos.

Bryant waved her toward the kitchen, guiding the pizza to an island countertop. "You drink, yeah?" he asked, and then disappeared around a corner.

“I try to,” Yaya said.

She looked over the room, its flatscreen TV wider than her bed, its couch and pleather chairs plumper than her loveseat. Bryant seemed to do well, and much as she wanted to criticize, the room looked nice. At least he’d decorated his walls beyond fridge magnets and stolen stickers.

His refrigerator was bare, not even a whiteboard. One flaw, at least.

“I know you said this is just an out-of-bed date,” he said, calling from another room. “But I have to ask. That thing you said before, sex gods. What’s that about? You in a cult or something, promised to the grand vizier or whatnot?”

The question should have rankled. He deserved sarcasm, nothing more, but Yaya didn’t feel like being annoyed right now.

Stop fighting, Magenta hummed.

“I started saying it after hearing about old polytheistic religions in school,” Yaya said. “I knew girls in Wicca, but that wasn’t for me, and then I couldn’t remember the gods’ names or pick one god gang over the others—”

Bryant appeared from around the corner, holding a dull green wine bottle. “It’s called a pantheon,” he cut in.

Yaya didn’t pause. “—so I started praying to the sex gods to bring me a girlfriend, or at least take my virginity. Took me a while to learn virginity is a bullshit concept, and then longer to lose it. But they’ve been good to me, so I thank them.”

Bryant didn’t seem to be listening. “A girlfriend, huh?” He slipped out of his reverie and set the wine bottle on the island. “Actually, some sex gods were mistaken fertility gods. You can take off your coat.”

“I don’t remember any names, so it doesn’t matter.” Yaya shed her borrowed coat and tossed it toward the couch, but the room was too wide and it flopped on the floor. She went to fetch it.

“Didn’t say it mattered. I was segueing into asking why you were at the clinic yesterday.” Bryant opened a cabinet and pulled down wine glasses and plates. “I know, a real icebreaker. Honest curiosity.”

“Honestly not anyone’s business since we aren’t sleeping together.” Yaya returned to the kitchen and peered at the wine bottle as if she’d know on sight whether or not it was good. “Routine exam. Not giving birth to alien babies. How about you?”

Bryant set everything on the counter and grinned. “Just making sure the boys can swim.”

Swim, Magenta repeated.

Bryant excused himself to the restroom, and Yaya noted the directions so

she wouldn't have to ask later. His house was nice, she hadn't changed her mind about that.

It also felt off. She might have lived in an apartment for so long that to step inside a larger home gave her vertigo, but following him wasn't like her. Magenta had to be the cause. Yaya couldn't see a reason to stay here. His excuse for visiting the fertility clinic sounded canned, a line he'd prepared had he traveled past flirting and into genuine conversation.

"What's your angle?" Yaya whispered.

Good things, Magenta said. *Peanut butter. Sex gods. Fighting the drunk girl.*

"I did you one better than peanuts," Yaya said. She'd asked for meat lover's on her half of the pizza, but the scent gave her trepidation.

Her cleft was climbing. In the pizza place restroom, she'd found it at the bottom of her bellybutton. It would cross over before midnight. The more she fed Magenta, the faster the transformation, and yet Yaya couldn't starve the parasite without starving herself.

"Talking to yourself?" Bryant asked, back from his halls. "Should I be worried? I hear that's a red flag on a first date."

Yaya bristled at the last word, but only sugar fell off her tongue. "More a magenta flag in my case."

"Actually, magenta's not a real color." Bryant chinned his beard toward one wall of paintings, as if they made him an expert on the color spectrum. "Our brains can't handle green poking its business between pink and purple, so it gives us this other hue."

I'm not a real color? Magenta asked. *Yowzah, loud and clear.*

Yaya cocked her head to one wall without looking. "They're yours?"

"A hobby." Bryant began pouring wine. "A man must master three crafts in his life. Computers and painting are two, but I'm working on a third."

Yaya watched the wine glasses and lifted hers the moment he pulled the bottle away. She wasn't sure what she was doing here, but she wasn't staying entirely sober. White wine paired with pizza, right? It tasted fine, and she'd watched his hands while he poured.

He began cutting the pizza and doling it onto oblong ceramic plates. "So, were you on the phone?" Was he really back to this?

He can't see me, Magenta said, and she made a clicking sound, something like laughter.

"You called it right," Yaya said. "I was talking to myself. Bad habit of living alone."

"Not for me," Bryant said. "Would start to worry I'm making my own

Tyler Durden."

Yaya watched the pizza. The air tasted of too-thin strips of chicken, bacon, and ham.

But Bryant wasn't done. His eyes widened. "You've never seen *Fight Club*? David Fincher's final film? I mean, his final good one before he did *Fight Club 2* and retired." He shuddered as if shaking off a traumatic memory.

"I'm not really into movies," Yaya said. "Except cartoons."

"But you know what I'm talking about. First rule of Fight Club, all that?"

Yaya shrugged. "I've heard the jokes."

Bryant gave a shocked guffaw. "The original *Fight Club* isn't a joke. It's a philosophy. We have to watch it, right now. Grab the drinks, will you?" He plucked up the plates and tore the pizza away toward the living room. "TV on, volume twenty-five." The flatscreen flickered to life.

"You don't want to talk?" Yaya asked.

"It's only a couple hours." Bryant turned to the screen. "I mean, we walked and talked all day, and now we're in my home. A little culture, like the art museum, and I want to share an experience. Is that bad?"

Yaya bristled at first, but then she gave in. It was just a movie, and it wouldn't run forever. She'd stood through longer shifts at Jumpies for less money than this pizza cost. She could sit through this in one of Bryant's cushiony chairs.

He nodded to her and turned again to the TV. "Find *Fight Club*. Play movie."

Bryant seemed tolerable through the first half. He was too caught up in it himself to notice that Yaya wasn't paying much attention. Magenta wriggled inside, the parasite acting as a giant tongue and lapping up protein. Yaya would only get the cheese and crust, maybe the tomato sauce if Magenta was generous. Once she settled, Yaya could eat in peace. She'd have a short window between Magenta's cravings.

The peace made Bryant's glances obvious. He was looking at her between bites of pizza and sips of wine, waiting for reactions she didn't know when to give. Had she cared, she would still find investment in the movie impossible between his sideways glances and knowing smirks, a blot of sauce painting his mouth red where his lips met his beard.

An electric guitar slashed across the end credits. "Stop movie," Bryant said, and the sound in the TV's black speakers cut out. "You are stone cold."

"Hm?" Yaya muttered.

"Nothing from you that whole time. No reaction. Like ice for blood." He didn't sound annoyed, more amused. He turned to her. "You're not a vampire,

are you?”

She side-eyed him and didn’t turn from the screen.

He held up his hands in that familiar surrender pose and gave an awkward smile. “Just playing.”

“I watched it.” Yaya shrugged. “He hated the way things were and got revenge. The end.”

“There’s a little more going on than that. Society recognizes a difference in principle between revenge and retribution. Revenge is a personal vendetta. Retribution can be personal too, but it demands justice. A fine line between both sides.”

“What if you’re just a sadist?”

Bryant wiped a napkin across his mouth, and his smile with it. “I don’t think you understood the movie. That’s okay. TV off.” He leaned into his seat, miffed now. “A sadist wouldn’t care. He’d have no conviction.”

Yaya sat for a long quiet, broken only when she couldn’t stifle a high-pitched yawn.

Bryant’s smile returned to life. “That was adorable.”

Yaya stood. “I should go.” Not that she knew where. Back to Doc’s place?

Bryant nodded. “Or you could stay.”

“We had this talk.”

“Take the couch. Hell, take the bed.” Bryant hurriedly cleaned up the dishes and glasses. “My treat. The hall bathroom’s more for guests anyway. I stick to mine in the bedroom.”

Yaya opened her mouth to protest again, but another yawn tore loose. She was ready to blame Magenta again. A stone mounted in her gut, dragging her consciousness deep into a dark sea, and she guessed that magenta-colored tentacles hid in the abyss.

“Couch, then,” Yaya said.

~

For all her drowsiness, she couldn’t sleep.

Deep in her gut, Magenta was awake, sliding, working, changing. Red slime would likely coat Bryant’s couch by morning, and unlike Doc’s bed, Yaya wouldn’t feel bad about it. She didn’t like him. Magenta wanted to stay, but did she understand why?

Yaya tossed away the blankets Bryant had taken out for her and sprang off the couch. An oven clock showed just past two in the morning.

You miss Doc? Magenta asked. She sounded sluggish.

“It doesn’t matter,” Yaya said. “You kind of canned that when you dragged us here. Now, she’s probably pissed. She might have reported us to ABP. It’s dangerous to go back.”

Pissed, Magenta repeated. *Doc is angry at us*.

“The parasite can learn.” Yaya pretended at surprise, but she knew better. If Magenta’s brain had grown from Yaya’s, then she would know every curse that Yaya’s mother had said since conception. Which was all of them.

She’ll eat, Magenta said. *When we’re angry, we eat.*

Yaya couldn’t deny that. Eating her feelings wasn’t the best coping mechanism, but she liked it more than her mother’s angry ranting. Yaya tip-toed toward the kitchen, flicked on a light, and poked around, hopeful that Bryant wouldn’t wake up. She didn’t want him to see her in top and underwear.

Peanut butter.

“I need fruits and veggies sometimes, you carnivore.” Yaya opened the pantry, where five bananas sat joined by their stems. She pulled them out and peeled.

Magenta squirmed. *No sweet.*

Yaya echoed her mother’s curses under her breath as she dug out a jar of peanut butter. Beneath the lid, a cardboard seal covered the opening. Yaya licked its underside, rolling brown butter onto her tongue, and chomped one banana’s tip.

Magenta’s displeasure melted. *Peanut butter,* she hummed.

The jar was the creamy kind, almost liquid, easy for dipping the banana inside and pulling out a coat of compromise. Yaya went through three bananas before she made herself stop. If Magenta wanted food, Doc’s place would’ve made more sense. No one else would accept Magenta. Had Yaya been interested in Bryant the way he liked, he would’ve changed his tune the moment he saw that cleft climbing her middle. How far now? She didn’t feel like checking, and she wouldn’t wait for his next proposition. She wanted out.

She hurried into her clothes, found her shoes, and grabbed Doc’s coat.

Don’t, Magenta warned, but she sounded groggy. *Too soon.*

Yaya grabbed the doorknob leading to the outer hallway. “What do you want? Tell me now.”

I don’t know. Never existed before.

“Maybe you’ll figure it out someday.” Yaya turned the knob and yanked. Or tried to. The door was locked.

That wasn’t surprising in the middle of the night. Yaya rubbed her thumb at the flat of the doorknob, no lock, and then patted along the doorframe for deadbolts she couldn’t see. There was a keyhole, nothing more. Without a key, it

could not be opened from the inside.

A chill sank through her. Her heart began to drum.

Big house. That extra hall separated the inner house from the outside. Pretty slabs of metal or wood decorated the windows, making them impossible to open. And his behavior. All red flags, but she'd turned her brain monochrome for that retro feel. Now everything shined a bleary magenta. She didn't know where he got his money or what let him take his mental health days or why he locked his door this way. Maybe on some level, he genuinely liked her.

But there was something wrong, and his grin and beard couldn't hide it.

If she screamed here, would the sound cross the glass into other houses? At best, someone would have to be strolling the street or walking their dog, both doubtful past two in the morning. In the unlikely event that someone could hear, would they care? That had never been Yaya's experience, not once in her life.

She pounded at the door. It trembled against its frame, but the wood didn't splinter. She needed a tool, but she couldn't think of one. Everything in Bryant's house looked soft and cozy. She was the hardest thing in this room, but the door stood harder.

"Like a thief in the night."

Yaya twisted around at Bryant's voice and pressed her back to the door. Her clothes had come disheveled, put on too fast and now come loose. She could tell by the way he eyed her, but she didn't want to look down at her clothes, or his shirt and boxer shorts. Her eyes fixed on his face.

"Isn't that great?" he said, throwing up his hands. They did not look to be surrendering this time. "Can't be a little grateful for a nice day, but off you run to give the neighbors a show."

"You locked us in." Yaya pounded at the wood again. "Unlock the door."

"Us?" Bryant glanced behind him at the walls, the windows. "Who's us?"

"No one. Unlock the door."

Bryant paced back and forth. One hand wiped at his beard. He seemed bigger now under the kitchen light, his frame casting a shadow deep through the living room.

"Wasn't I nice?" he asked.

"We don't owe you shit for that," Yaya said.

"We. Us." He cocked his head to one side. "Is this a setup? Who were you really talking to before?" His eyes scanned her clothes again, but not the same as when he'd first emerged. "You're wearing a wire."

Yaya said nothing. If he thought he was being recorded, maybe he'd be cautious. Maybe he'd unlock the damn door.

Instead, he stepped closer. "Whatever they told you, it's bullshit."

Yaya couldn’t press flatter against the door. “Keep back.”

“I thought I could trust you.”

“Not another step.”

“Why?” His blue eyes gleamed. “It’s a recording, isn’t it? You’re narrating, but there’s no one to listen. There’s never been anyone to listen, has there?” His toes stopped at her shoes, his figure blocking the light, engulfing her, his breath sweeping ringlets of hair from her face. One hand reached for her jacket and parted it from her heart. “Let me see. It can be okay again, like when we were having a nice time.” His fingers hooked her top’s neckline and tugged the fabric away from her skin.

She locked both hands around his wrist, but her arms felt frail, energy sapped elsewhere.

“No wire.” Bryant smirked, let go of her shirt, and took a step back. “Okay.”

“No,” Yaya said. “Not okay.”

Magenta’s arms spilled forward, a pile of writhing pink spaghetti. Their force pressed up Yaya’s top, where the cleft had climbed, and out of her waistline where the cleft had always been. She felt her pants shimmying down and didn’t care. Her palms splayed over wood and pressed her off the door.

Bryant staggered back. His mouth formed a black hole in his beard.

“Okay? This okay?” Yaya stepped toward him, one hand pressed to her tank top where his fingers had yanked it down. “Tell me what you think she is.” Bryant’s lips quivered. He had tears in his eyes.

“Don’t hold out on me, man,” Yaya said, taking two steps forward for each of his steps back. “You’re not the type with no opinion, and especially not the type who keeps it to himself. Tell me what you think. For once, I really want to know.”

At Yaya’s next step, one of Magenta’s limbs lashed forward. White barbs glimmered in the kitchen light before slashing across Bryant’s chest. His shirt split open in red tatters, and he fell backward, crying out.

Yaya grasped at the tentacle’s root. Its barbs bit into her palm, but she didn’t want Magenta to go this far.

The tentacle drew back, coated in blood, and Yaya’s lower abdomen swelled open where Magenta’s stalk spilled forward. Muscles knotted across every inch. Her teeth hadn’t grown, but her horns seemed longer than twenty-four hours ago, sharp and black as night. The returning tentacle curled toward Magenta’s mouth, and her jaw snapped open, engulfing the bloody tip.

Yaya’s head went quiet in an instant.

Clouds of thought and impulse faded, a cacophony she hadn’t noticed

before. Weight fell from her mind in an avalanche of stones. She was light now, a feather in the shape of a woman. She couldn't remember when life began setting stones across her thoughts, crushing her with care and patience, but now blood had relieved the pressure, leaving her with relief she'd never felt before. In this moment of clarity, she could fly.

She looked to her palms, fingertips dotted by blood. Was this how other people felt all the time? Did they just exist? She turned her hands over and then turned them back as if seeing them for the first time.

Magenta's adaptation hadn't drawn Yaya to Bryant for sex. They had come for blood.

Bryant rolled over onto his hands and knees. "What did you do to me?" he coughed. His first grunt, an attempt to stand, shoveled a fresh stone onto Yaya's mind, swollen with guilt. The rest came crawling back.

No, not yet. She needed a clear mind right now, undizzied with sarcastic comments and anxiety and the thick malaise she'd been drowning in ever since she'd first heard of Sibs at age thirteen. She needed blood.

Magenta lashed out, and this time Yaya didn't fight. The limb sprang loose, jabbed Bryant's skin, and broke through to shimmering red. He scuttled toward the far wall, desperate. At the next barbed lash, he began screaming.

"TV on!" Yaya shouted. "Volume fifty, play movie."

Fight Club's end credits swallowed Bryant's screams in another slash of electric guitar. Magenta dove a tentacle into his body. Blood swallowed the tip, and then her protruding stalk swallowed the blood, a banana dipped in liquid clarity. The rest of her tentacles sprang forward, and Yaya stormed closer.

She felt Magenta's hum in her ears.

Peanut butter. "Peanut butter."

11

Magenta felt the cop tank's rumble before Yaya heard it, a warning that quaked down Bryant's walls and through their conjoined nerves. The cops had been slow coming, but the tremor meant they'd parked outside. Yaya had seconds to spring out of the bathtub, throw a towel around her dripping body, and amble to the front door. Had she thought ahead, she would've turned off all the lights outside the bathroom and drawn the curtains to pretend no one was home, but no one ever checked on screams in her neighborhood. She had been conditioned to let these things go.

Bryant lived in a different kind of neighborhood. Screams had suggested to neighbors that something was amiss, contrary to Yaya's expectations. Someone must have been walking the street and heard the commotion after all. The TV's volume might have thrown them off, explaining the delay, but eventually they had decided to call the cops.

And here cops came, knocking at the outer door.

Yaya fumbled with Bryant's keyring until she unlocked the inner door and slipped through the creepy corridor to the outer. Two tall officers waited behind a sliding chain, each clad in blue plastic-looking armor. Blue and black masked helmets hid their faces. Their cop tank sat toad-like at the sidewalk, its gunmetal gray surface mottled with steel warts, from which cops shot gas cannisters, soundwave blasts, and live rounds.

They spoke in unison. "Evening, ma'am." "Morning, miss." They glanced at each other and then back to her.

"Happy technically Wednesday," Yaya said. "What's up?"

"Got a report of disturbance," Black Mask said.

"Some commotion," Blue Mask added.

Yaya forced a sheepish grin. "All's well. My boyfriend and I got rowdy, but we didn't mean to scare anyone." She pretended to struggle at keeping the towel wrapped around her.

Blue Mask shuffled, his armor clunking.

Black Mask remained stiff. "And where's he?"

"Sleeping," Yaya said. "He always falls asleep after. I was taking a bath."

Blue Mask turned away. "Miss, you've got—uh." His black-gloved finger pointed at her legs.

Yaya could only make out the faintest red raindrop reaching her knee, which meant the cops could see much more. "Shit, my period." Her free hand cupped between her legs so that the towel bunched as if to staunch her blood

flow. “I’m so sorry, but I need to take care of this. He must’ve—” She coughed and wished she could blush on command. Averting her eyes from the cops’ masks would have to do.

“Of course, right, yes,” Blue Mask said, retreating toward Bryant’s driveway. “Enjoy the rest of your night, miss.” He patted his partner’s arm and turned to the street and their cop tank.

Black Mask lingered, his head tilting in study. Yaya didn’t move. She couldn’t tell whether he was onto her or using his authority as an excuse to soak her in.

“Please, have a good night, Mr. Policeman,” she said. It was the coyest she’d sounded since she was sixteen.

He withdrew at last and let her close the door. Another few seconds passed before his footsteps clacked down the walkway and back to the street. She retreated through the inner door and shut it, but she didn’t return to her bath until she heard the cop tank rumble through the suburb and toward Riverside Avenue. By now, everyone in the neighborhood had to be awake and wondering which jackass had called the cops.

Yaya’s bath was lukewarm. A chitinous residue slathered the tub’s porcelain edges. It reminded her of strawberry jam, only instead of chunky preserves, this substance carried bits of bone or cartilage. She drained the tub of water and slime alike, turned the hot water nozzle to full blast, and threw her towel across the nearest wall-mounted hook.

The slime had shed with fresh changes over the last hour. Magenta seemed to slough cells when she was in a hurry, and Yaya dozed through most of it, her newfound clarity offering insights into both body and thought.

How long had she been depressed? She’d felt she was being crushed and drained for years, but depression hadn’t crossed her mind. Now it seemed obvious. She used to think everyone’s life felt this way and that she was being a baby about it. An inherited rationalization from her mother, likely, which explained a few things about their relationship and why her mother had started contact again after months of therapy. Something had been wrong.

Obvious, so damn obvious, but Yaya’s head had been squeezed too tight to notice.

She was free now. The air itself breathed better against her skin. She was smiling when she didn’t have anything in particular to smile about. Relief, she guessed. Getting out of the tub to answer the door hadn’t felt like fighting the world. Now she had the chance to get back in the bath and explore her body again.

Her once-blue eye, now magenta, shined in the light. Her hazel eye now ran

orange at the edges. The cleft of her vaginal lips reached halfway up her sternum. Her bellybutton was gone. The blood running down her leg must have dribbled from there, but it wasn't her period, and it wasn't her blood. Her fingers prodded the edge. Each tap shot lightning through her muscles.

She hadn't noticed the new chompers when Bryant had tugged at her shirt. Thick and pointed columns of crocodile teeth grew to either side of the cleft, hidden beneath folds of sensitive skin. He must have seen them when she came at him. No wonder he was scared. What had he thought she would do?

Probably not what she did. That was a surprise even to her.

She slid one foot along the bathroom tiles. Blood stuck where it had seeped from Bryant's torso. She didn't look there; she looked to her shin, where yesterday morning's translucent carapace had now hardened into ugly gray armor that would've been the envy of those cops at the door. As if her body needed armor.

"Adaptation," she whispered, echoing Doc.

Doc could've made logical ties between experiences and changes, cause and effect. The shin carapace felt obvious. Yaya couldn't explain her latest teeth. She wondered if Magenta had developed a taste for blood as some biological coping mechanism for Yaya's depression, a way to keep it from slowing them down.

How far would adaptation go? If she climbed onto Bryant's roof and jumped off, would Magenta shoot wings from Yaya's shoulder blades and guide them unharmed to the ground? Unlikely the metamorphosis worked so fast; this seemed a gradual process. Quick, but not instant, and every bodily change accrued a cost. Sometimes peanut butter. Sometimes more. A fall would kill Yaya like anyone else. She was not immortal.

Her hand drifted through the tub water—steamy yet sublime. She shut off the faucet and let the tub cool a moment. Too fast, and her skin might thicken. She would lose feeling then, and she'd spent too much of her life feeling too little. Better to feel everything she could, sink into it, enjoy it.

Immersed in the tub again, she watched the warm water pluck red scales from her leg. Yaya would have to hope neither of those cops suspected foul play, too embarrassed or lecherous to wonder about that red raindrop.

Her fingers stroked too high, crossing sensitive folds. She let them wander, one fingertip tracing the side of her crocodilian teeth, and a powerful shudder rocked her spine. She tried again, fingertips beginning at the base of her cleft and stroking toward her chest.

If only Doc were here.

She was charming in a nonsensically determined way. Responsibility still

mattered to her. Yaya supposed that meant she should care, too. She and Magenta both had a fondness for Doc, and what she cared about warranted at least some consideration. Yaya had always made her intimacy and pleasure someone else's responsibility. Her Friday Night Alternatives vibrator was more a distraction from glum evenings than a relationship between herself and her body. She couldn't remember the last time she'd truly indulged.

Then again, her body hadn't seemed to care in return. Now she had Magenta, changing her, no choice in that. Yaya would have balked at that once, but there was a freedom in having no choice. No guilt, no crushing stones on her mind. Magenta was the gateway. Maybe there was a lesson here, that the freedom was inside her all along, or the vagina monster was the friend she'd made along the way. Something silly like that.

Silliness made her smile wider and reach deeper. Every muscle in her body went taut and then shuddered, splashing bathwater over the rim of the tub. She was loud again, but she hoped that if any of Bryant's neighbors wandered outside now, they would feel too embarrassed to call the cops over this kind of scream.

Her muscles melted into cooked pasta, and she sank up to her nose.

After a few minutes, she was hungry again. The stones weren't coming back yet, but she felt them in the distance, a cartoon boulder teetering atop a mountain and ready to roll after the Roadrunner, only to come looping back around and crush Wile E. Coyote. Yaya couldn't know her place in this scenario, but she guessed she was the coyote. Her mind seemed self-destructive that way. She needed liquid anti-depressant. She needed—

Peanut butter. Her submerged lips bubbled an echo: "Peanut butter."

Her cleft's jaws opened, releasing pink tentacles up through the water and over the tub. They had grown thick since lashing Bryant in the living room and now had to crush together to fit inside her. She was again unsure of what had become of her old organs, but she no longer cared. Her body functioned. Better, it was thriving.

Bryant lay face-down on the floor, his blood leaking around him. He grunted at Magenta's touch, but she had taken away his power to move and scream, stripped by barbed tentacles. She sank their tips into blood, coiled around muscle, and dragged flesh into the tub, into Yaya's chest, into the cleft.

When Magenta finished feeding, Yaya's fingers went exploring again. No depression, no crushing stones. The boulder atop its cliff settled. Yaya would keep it there long as she could, a day no coyotes would be crushed. Maybe two days, or three. She thought they could make Bryant last that long.

In fact, she had ideas on how to make him last much longer.

12

The ABP offices at 110 Warren Street always felt worn, every marble surface flat and dingy, as if the company had cut the materials from an aging warehouse and placed them inside the skyscraper's glass exoskeleton. Most windows had to be blocked off for security, making the glass near pointless. ABP developed everything from anti-viral treatments to skin creams, chemical agents to visceral weapons once only dreamed of in comic books. Life and death sat in the palms of their hands.

Had Doc made different choices on Monday night, or Tuesday morning, she would be visiting Yaya in the analysis lab. Instead, she'd come home to an empty apartment, and now she hadn't seen Yaya or Magenta in three days. She didn't know how to process the pair—two pieces or a whole? Whatever they were, they'd vanished in the pre-winter wind.

This ever happen before? Yaya had asked. Magenta had drawn the past screaming back from its nine-year grave.

Doc stepped off the elevator at the tenth floor, which housed the Display Hall. The analysis lab sometimes treated this as their toybox, where they put everything they had broken after playing too hard. Playtime tended to be long. Doc was relieved that most of what they brought here arrived already dead.

She passed familiar wings, their walls broken in by glass cases and shelves. Organs floated in honey-colored jars. Nothing whole; samples had already been torn apart, their pieces stuffed here. Bubbles clung to the glass, some having thickened with a scaly crust, but they couldn't hide the horrors within. Fingers twined in loose spaghetti coils here, a heart the size of Doc's head there, and all around things with no names but brimming with potential.

What Doc had come to see for the thousandth time was too large for jars. The remains floated in a yellowed aquarium set into the wall, twice her height all around. Outside the glass, a plaque read off the serial number given by R&D's data and cataloging.

Doc knew this better as the last known remains of the Kentucky Incident.

No one ever spoke to her about the frequent visits. Surely they whispered, much as gas masks allowed, but she hoped they presumed scientific fascination. She'd certainly believed that was her reason at first, and only time and tenderness had made her quit lying to herself. Truth was, she kept coming back for the same reason people left flowers at graves.

Across fourteen years and five state assignments, since leaving her university lab assistant position to work for ABP, she had never seen anything

like the Kentucky Incident. Looking at the remains now, knowing they had been part of a living creature, she wasn't sure human eyes were meant to look upon anything like it.

To this day, no one knew for certain just what that Kentucky Sibs station had pumped into that chimera girl. Theories ran the gamut from poor prior testing of that particular brew, to a genetic abnormality, to an unfortunate reaction with local pollution. If anyone in the analysis lab had found answers, they didn't share. The remains were meat to them, a biological hard drive of information, nothing more.

They had never met the person inside. Only Doc had spoken to her. No one else present that night at the school had felt a pang of regret in their stone hearts for having to destroy her.

She was beautiful, even writhing beneath a shining moon while fires raged in all directions. And beneath that monstrous beauty, larger than life, she'd wanted what Doc had. Freedom to leave, where she had freedom to love.

In 1999, Kentucky and three other like-minded states couldn't secede from the union without disturbing a federal beast. Instead, their elected officials declared martial law and ushered in the age of statesmen. Their connections to companies like ABP kept Congress off their backs while they shut state borders and rooted out perceived deviancies in the name of liberty.

ABP had assigned Doc there for reasons only Human Resources could know, maybe some diversity quota. They might as well have dropped her into a desert, not a drop of affection to be found. No girlfriend, no dating, no lovers. Plenty of men eyed her, their attention unwanted as ever. Some women carried on secret affairs, but Doc didn't fight the grain with them. Life among the roving statesmen was temporary for her.

As the old saying went: When in Rome, send a transfer request to the ABP Board ASAP.

But she saw them—the women who would never get out. They were familiar with the boot and knew better than to show themselves. Doc made eye contact with the queer ones often, people hiding in closets or passing stealth or taking on the wrong gender assumptions just to stay alive. She passed them knowing nods and glances but kept her distance. She couldn't afford to have a heart in that place.

Until that night at the school, facing down a teenage girl turned pale, sickly dragon, her every limb having split into dozens of boneless ropes, writhing with barbed muscle. And still, Doc had ordered in the chemicals and fires, solving the problem as far as the statesmen perceived. She had approached the school, disappeared briefly, and then reappeared with a plan. No one needed to know

what went on while the monster let her get close.

After that, ABP turned the town into a black site and wiped it off every database as if it had never existed. The Kentucky Incident became the name because it had no other, no land for that school to have called home. Workers tore open the earth and removed all pipework and electrical lines that didn't feed neighboring towns. Officially, this was to ensure every piece of the creature was destroyed. In earnest, ABP wanted every piece for themselves.

The Display Hall smelled metallic and stale, nothing like the creature that night. Before the chemical clouds and smoke, she'd had a scent like citrus and fresh milk. Taken from the glass, Doc doubted she'd smell like anything but formaldehyde and rot.

Grime coated the edges of the aquarium where it fitted into the steel wall, and dust dotted the glass, but there were no smudges or fingerprints. Only newly recruited ABP agents and curious scientists visited, their hands sealed in rubber. They never touched the glass, and they never came back. The Kentucky Incident's data well had dried long ago.

Doc alone kept vigil. No one else cared.

The aquarium's corners were compartmentalized, holding several ends of preserved tentacles. The largest piece floated at the center. Once-milky pockmarked flesh had taken on a dingy mustard coating. Within the jagged clump, bound in barbed limbs and wrapped in a damp membrane, there appeared the face of a teenage girl.

Was she sixteen or seventeen when she died? Doc thought she'd known while driving to the school that night on an urgent call, along with the girl's grade, extracurricular activities, and psychological profile. Now all she knew was a name, Camille. The other pointless facts had seeped down the empty hole in time between when she approached the school from across the outdoor field and when she returned to the waiting statesmen with a heavy heart and a plan.

By morning, the school was gone, and so was the girl.

In the aftermath, Doc had been caught in a cloud of what she'd thought were only chemical vapors. She didn't learn until later that pieces of organic matter had floated in the wind, spores of the Kentucky Incident. Her DNA was not the same when she left Kentucky as when she had arrived.

She got used to answering uncomfortable questions after that. No, she didn't have albinism. No, she didn't bleach her hair. No, sir, she wasn't interested. Yes, she meant it. Oh, did you know white flakes have grown off her tongue ever since the incident, and sometimes appear in her menstrual—what, you weren't asking that? But you seemed so interested a moment ago.

When the work was done, ABP footed the bill, ordered the clean-up, and

left Doc twisting in the Kentucky wind for another month before some executive finally approved her transfer request. No gratitude. She was used to that.

Yaya was right; Magenta was not unprecedented. She had intelligence, and whatever had grown out of that poor girl in Kentucky had been intelligent, too. Pieces of the girl had woven through her barbed tentacles, the pale dragon a manifestation of her repression and resentment. Her metamorphosis might have started out like Yaya's, and beneath an oppressive presence, she might not have mentioned the beginnings of change to her doctors at the Sibs stations or otherwise. Coincidence, or were she and Yaya two limbs of an alike tree?
Or was ABP's brew to blame, that last Sibs station shot before the girl's transformation?

Doc stared into the girl-turned-monster's long-dead eyes. How long had it taken before they even let her visit that first time? She hadn't counted. ABP took its time and everyone else's.

ABP took everything.

Boots squeaked in the hall. Another visitor? No, that sound of hurried shuffling meant someone had come to fetch her. Every day, Doc visited the analysis lab only to find Magenta's sample had yet to be processed. She would've liked to collect samples from different areas, especially from Magenta's arms, since no one exactly knew which parts of a chimera held which DNA strands, but her mind had been elsewhere the other night.

Yaya's DNA had to be different now, didn't it? Something she would've passed on to children had she borne any. Same as Doc. Motherhood had never been in her plans, but she guessed her artificial bleaching would find its way down the genetic pipeline were she to donate eggs someday. Worse traits might follow. A baby might not form at all.

Doc recognized Greenwich through gas mask and hazard suit by his slouched gait as he hurried down the hall. His phone glowed from one hand. Others recognized her, surely, but one of the few non-health benefits of mandatory gas masks was that no one could see her lips curl with annoyance.

"I'm on break," she said. "Can it wait?"

"Urgent priority," Greenwich said, his gas mask rasping. "Incident. Public relations, damage control—"

Doc would need aspirin by evening. "Spare me the rhetoric, please."

Greenwich held up his screen, filled with images of a blood-soaked bathroom. "Can't assess until on site, but details suggest Yolanda Betancourt."

13

A false foyer opened into a small corridor, where an inner door led into the house proper. There were no windows. Had it not been early Friday afternoon, with crisp sunlight stretching Doc's shadow from the front doorway, she might have wandered into pitch blackness.

But the inner door was open, the living room busied over by a uniformed officer. He beckoned Doc and her team to enter.

"Wouldn't have called, but the body's in such a state," he said in a gruff voice. "Orders are, we tell AlphaBeta about the weird ones." His partner was poking around a hall toward the back of the house, uninterested in speaking with ABP agents.

Brown pools dotted the living room's wooden floor between the couch and a decorative pillar. A yellow evidence marker stood at each of the largest splotches. Doc approached, fist tight around the handle of her black bag. When the police called ABP, they didn't call their own forensics team. They would wait until she assessed whether this was ABP's problem or theirs. How many cases fell apart during those delays?

"That's nothing there," the officer said. "You like that, you'll love the bathroom."

Doc did not love the bathroom. At a glance, she could tell it hadn't been cleaned in quite some time, even before the body and the gore. Blood caked black in the grout between tiles. Bright red residue stained the tub's porcelain basin as if someone had recently dyed their hair in a pink mess.

A bigger mess lay on the floor. Doc was glad her gas mask guarded her from the corpse. He wore a T-shirt and boxers, both slashed apart. Hunks of flesh had been torn from his torso and limbs, leaving chewed gashes.

Worst was the head, or what was left of it. Someone had cracked open his skull, less a blunt cranial injury, more like an egg.

And the yolk was missing.

"He got a name?" Aziz asked. He and Greenwich kept outside the bathroom door, giving Doc space to examine.

"Bryant Peters," the officer said.

Doc wasn't sure why Aziz had asked. Maybe he was a more decent human than herself and wanted to respect the dead, but no bedside manner could help a corpse. She drew steel tongs from her bag, pulled a sheet of plastic from the ends, and plucked at Bryant's clothing, inspecting each wound.

The officer cleared his throat. "We usually use a—" He choked on his own

words. Aziz must have turned to him, and despite their own humanity-free face shields, most officers found ABP gas masks unnerving.

Doc couldn't blame them. Still, there were more unnerving things in this city than ABP agents. She found one nestled in Bryant's flesh and had to swap tongs for tweezers to snatch it. She'd seen one before, yanked from Aziz's neck. Two inches long, made of bone or cartilage, a leftover from vaginal limbs.

Doc had hoped Yaya might have scrounged up cash and hopped on a bus headed west. There were places where she would be miserable, but there were also places where she could disappear. But she hadn't. She was here, and she was lethal.

Doc showed her team the splinter. Greenwich kept focused on his phone until Aziz nudged his arm.

The officer tried to peer between them. "That a porcupine quill?"

"No," Doc said, standing from the corpse. "It's very human."

"Betancourt, prime suspect, as speculated," Greenwich said.

Aziz's gas mask scanned the bathroom and then his shoulders flinched. "Betancourt really did this?" he asked. "Weird equipment in her lap, but seriously, that little thing she was?"

Was being the operative word. Yaya was a mystery, even to Doc, Magenta having brought new adaptations. Doc wondered at their catalysts. Which ones necessitated that Magenta crack open and empty Bryant's skull?

"Suspected, speculated," Greenwich said. "Not definite. Common ground with other subjects experiencing teeth, each attended mandatory acute zygote manifestation syndrome checks on October 12. No men involved. Two trans women, HRT but no GRS, grew teeth externally."

"How many people we talking here?" Aziz asked.

Greenwich scrolled down his phone. "Dozens."

Doc eyed the red bathroom. She would have liked to believe someone else had done this. If hormones were the key, that left a wide range of affected chimeras, not just anyone with a vagina, but penis, intersex, limitless.

"Hormone treatment affects it," Doc echoed. "And menstrual cycles?" Yaya had been on her period last Saturday, almost a month since her October 12 appointment at the Sibs station. Odds were good she'd been on her period back then, too.

Greenwich looked up from his phone but said nothing.

"Hormonal fluctuation caused by menstrual cycles." Doc snapped her fingers. "Bring up those comparisons."

"We don't. Have that." Greenwich looked to his phone again.

"Why not? Don't you ask?" Silence. "We engage in every invasive

question and procedure imaginable, but we don't ask if each patient is menstruating? Contact all chimeras with October 12 appointments at that station and ask."

Greenwich's yellow hazard suit seemed to turn green. "Can't you do it?"

"I'll get the process started, but for now, we should assume Betancourt," Aziz said, tapping his neck. "Violent history."

And strong, Doc noted. She'd appreciated that strength on Monday night. Less so, now.

Aziz retreated from the bathroom and approached the officer. "Street cams get anything?"

The officer scoffed. "It's the suburbs, buddy. No street cams." He took another glance at the body. "No need for them, usually."

Aziz stood straighter, stiffer. "We have need."

Greenwich raised his phone as if holding up a trophy. "I'm on with tech."

The tech department could scarcely crack a phone's security, let alone invent a time machine to travel back and install cameras throughout Bryant's neighborhood. Which meant Greenwich was talking weapons for the hunt. Firearms, flames, chemical gas, and mobile units.

And possibly the Predator Engine.

"Kentucky Part 2: Newark," Greenwich said. "Appropriate tools necessary." Was that his equivalent of a joke?

Doc didn't laugh. She bagged the new quill and pressed it into his free hand. "Run this to the analysis lab," she said. "Cross with the last sample. Urgent."

She could swear his gas mask brightened. "I won't let you down," he said, and shuffled back to the false foyer. He would have to call a rideshare or another company vehicle. Or if he'd called the Predator Engine, maybe he would hitch a ride with its crew.

A sound of thunder rang through the house minutes later, earth-shattering engines saying yes, Greenwich had done exactly that.

Doc hurried to the living room windows, quaking in their frames. On the street, gray pipework curled with amber light, hardly visible by day, yet terrifying by night. She had only seen this diesel monstrosity once before. She had abstained from riding along on whatever coastal mission it had been off to—spotting it one evening in the Manhattan dockyard was chilling enough.

Now it rumbled down the quiet street, drawing eyes to every suburban window. Gargantuan tires could flatten every middle-class sensible car on this block into sheet metal. Black smoke billowed from high smokestacks jutting from its back end, exhaust pumped from the colossal engine. Grease dribbled

down its pipes, leaving an oily snail trail wherever it rumbled.

"This is overkill," Doc said.

Aziz sighed hard, a static sound through his gas mask. "Overkill is ABP's favorite."

Doc hoped hard that Yaya had stolen money from Bryant and taken that hypothetical bus. She needed to get somewhere ABP would never find her. Not if she wanted to live.

14

The day eventually ended. Doc had to remind herself it was over when she stopped at a Jumpies on the way home, though she'd yanked off her gas mask and banana suit an hour ago. Traffic was garbage, and she and Aziz had needed to run Bryant's body to the lab on Warren Street before they could commute their separate ways.

Neither spotted Greenwich. He was probably prowling the streets in the Predator Engine, its smokestacks cutting years off the lives of every pedestrian. The sky was dark now; the Predator Engine would glow amber wherever it went.

Doc remembered Yaya worked at Jumpies. Not necessarily this location, but a Jumpies nearby. All checks confirmed she hadn't worked since Saturday. Now, it was Friday again, and she must've been fired. She wouldn't be working at any Jumpies anywhere.

Doc left with a plastic bag swinging from her wrist, a package of sour candies inside. Her free hand clutched her keys as she crossed the parking lot. A text message vibration made her stop one foot behind her car. She wrenched the phone from her coat and glanced at the screen. Keys in one hand, phone in the other, plastic bag slung over her wrist, accosted by all sides of life.

GREENWICH: Samples match. Report to analysis. Board demands pursuit of unique specimen.

Doc stared a moment. They wanted her back at Warren Street again. What was she supposed to do that a team of agents couldn't? ABP's bureaucracy left constant gaps within its system, a masochistic block of swiss cheese armed with a power drill. The Board demanded Yaya right now. Something the lab had found made the Board presume her biologically significant—which she was—and more importantly, profitable.

Doc was going home to sprinkle pepper onto otherwise flavorless pasta and chase that meal with enough sour sugar to burn her tongue. Only Greenwich couldn't seem to understand that ABP shouldn't own every aspect of their lives. Too many hours in the gas mask.

She began texting him that she wasn't heading back out, that the Board could stuff it for now, and after her appointment tomorrow morning, she would —

Fingers brushed down her lower back. Her muscles twitched, an involuntary tremor along her spine. The touch was cold, lifeless. She would've assumed she'd imagined it until a glance over her shoulder caught a broad shape skulking past, his pale face glancing over his denim jacket's shoulder to stare at

her.

Her thumb paused mid-text, and her fingers tightened around her keys. A packet of morphine-loaded syringes sat in her black bag, back seat of her car. Those weren't doled out for self-defense, but they would certainly work better than keys.

The man swiveled mid-step, turning to face her fully. "Hey."

He was coming back. She had stared too long and now made eye contact. Her mistake, of course—the powers that be put responsibility on her to not encourage him.

"Checking me out?" he asked. "Same." His eyes undressed her up and down.

"I'm flattered," Doc said. "But I'm not in the mood." She had played this game better in Kentucky, but she'd been in her late twenties then and more flexible. Nine years on, she had little patience for throwing on a smile to soothe roaming egos.

He stepped close enough to reach out and touch her again.

She clutched her keys and glared into his eyes, too set in the lot's darkness to see their hue. He had to be twenty-seven, twenty-eight. At best, he had no idea what he was doing, but the world was telling him *Go for it, go for it or you're a loser*. His hand rubbed at his two-day cheek stubble. When it dropped, he was smiling. Probably some women found that charming, a sleight of hand that passed his grin to their faces.

Doc wanted to tell him that wouldn't work, that he needed to settle back and see the big picture before he went hounding every woman he took a fondness for like an unneutered dog.

Instead, her eyes settled on a darkness deeper than his eyes and farther away, wandering among parked cars. They weren't alone in the lot. The man didn't notice the shadow's approach until its mouth opened.

"She doesn't want to fuck you." The shadow slid from darkness, familiar in voice, face, and lavender suit, now tattered and stained, yet still Yaya's. One of Doc's old winter coats hung from her shoulders.

The man turned and raised an open hand. "Mind your business."

Tension yanked at Doc's shoulders. "I know her," she said. As if he cared.

But Yaya's shout drowned her out. "Why do you want her, man? Why not me?" She stepped closer. Her fingers traveled up her lavender jacket, opening it button by button.

The man looked again. His eyes trailed Yaya from bottom to top, and then he chortled. Not amused, but relieving tension.

Doc expected Yaya to look her way, get some confirmation to intervene,

but Yaya stayed fixed on the man. Another car slid past them, its headlights shining on the man's skin, Yaya's hair. White mist trickled from his mouth, but it steamed from hers. She was hot, maybe feverish? Except breath didn't work that way.

"What if I'm not good?" Yaya asked, a taunt in her voice. Her fingers finished the final button, and both sides of her jacket parted from her black top. "Come on, man, aren't I hot? My brain doesn't work the way it used to, so I don't know. Please tell me." She reached for the hem of her top, curled it in her fingers, and yanked it up her chest. "Am I hot, or not?"

The cleft that began between Yaya's thighs now climbed past her waist and belly button, where it peaked at her collarbone. Magenta didn't emerge, but she didn't have to. Folds of pink labial skin lined the cleft, and partly obscured beneath them stretched furious crocodile teeth. Those lips peeled back same as a shark revealing its gums before a bite. Narrow red ropes snaked between them.

The man stumbled into Doc and then flinched away from her as if he'd touched Yaya. Doc didn't react, stiff as stone. She'd seen some of this before. The rest shouldn't have changed so much since Tuesday.

Yaya seemed a tower now. "Yeah, I got teeth down there. So what?" She flashed a pearly grin. "Women got teeth up here, too, and that never stops guys like you from sticking it in, every chance." Her teeth parted, and she pushed her tongue through. It waggled in unison with Magenta's tentacles, their tips curling toward their prey.

The man spun around, stumbled, and ran. He'd probably been on the way to his car before touching Doc without consent, but he'd forgotten it and broke for the street without thinking, a high-pitched whine caught in his throat.

Yaya paused where he once stood. "Four of five dentists agree, I'm not a special case," she said. She let her top drape the cleft and cupped her hands around her mouth. "You hear me? Better watch out before we chomp your dick off! Yaya yowzah!" Her hands dropped as she doubled over snickering, breath puffing in thick clouds.

A soft wind batted Doc's plastic bag. She might have run after that man if she was smarter, but she couldn't take her eyes off Yaya's midriff, the cleft poking out.

"How did you know I was here?" Doc asked. Her first words to Yaya since Tuesday.

Yaya took her time standing up straight again, letting each vertebra slide over the first in a long, firm crack. "The cops came back to Bryant's house while I was still there. So did you. And traffic was shit today, the kind where you can walk faster than the cars."

“You’re stalking me.”

“They’ll hunt me.” Yaya stretched her arms and then grinned. “That’s what you told me.”

“Yes,” Doc muttered.

“They’ll find clues. Little warnings.” Yaya sidled closer, around to Doc’s back. “Any peanut butter in that bag?”

“Sour candy.”

Yaya recoiled. Her gut seemed to cave in. “That’s fine. I’ll find something to eat.”

Doc eyed her phone again. “They’re looking for you.”

“They think nothing’s changed, that’s why. But it has.” Yaya slinked to Doc’s front again, eyes flitting to keys and then phone. “No more Sibs checkups. No more injections. Those tiny tests wouldn’t be enough for them anyway, not if they caught me. I am what they made me, and now if they touch me, they’ll regret it.”

Doc inspected Yaya’s face. What big eyes she had. “Are you Magenta?”

Another mean snicker fell from Yaya’s mouth. “No clue. Isn’t that neat? My whole body’s riding a pendulum—Yaya, Magenta, Yaya, Magenta. A little bit of other things inside, too, but I can’t see the line.” She swept one hand down her chest, where the covered cleft sucked in a pleased gasp. “At the center, I’m all me.”

The midriff stole Doc’s gaze again. The cleft’s lips stayed pursed, no longer playing at animalistic threat display, but she knew the teeth were there. “I have to call you in,” Doc said.

“Right away?” Yaya danced one hand in the air between Doc’s face and phone. Her voice took on a playful sing-song. “If they take me, you’ll never touch me again.”

“You need help. Something’s affecting you.” Infecting, Doc almost added. Bryant Peters on his bathroom floor flashed through her head, his skull empty. “It’s chemical, or possibly hormonal.”

“It could be either of those, sure.” Yaya nodded, her head bobbing closer. “Do you like the infection?” she whispered. “Do you like me?”

Doc opened her mouth to answer and then closed it.

Yaya hovered inches away. “You’re brilliant, you could figure out every detail about me if I’d only lie on a steel table, let you cut me over petri dishes and test tubes. But that’s not where you want me to lie down most, is it?” She was taller now, for certain. How? She couldn’t have grown taller, not at her age.

Doc turned from Yaya’s shimmering eyes to her phone. Her thumb crossed the screen, forcing it to light up, and the glow settled onto Yaya’s lavender suit,

her soft hands, the glimpse of Magenta underneath. Beautiful and alluring. A familiar storm hummed between Doc and Yaya and Magenta, a promise that if last Friday after Pandora's Aquarium had been a drizzle and Monday was a downpour, then tonight would bring a hurricane.

Doc didn't think she was weak that way, but she'd spent too much time giving others what they wanted. She pressed a button to blacken the phone screen.

Yaya leaned close enough to kiss. "Your place, or mine?"

15

Yaya didn't sleep anymore. She had dozed in Bryant's bathtub half-awake, some shared responsibility of consciousness between Magenta and herself. Insomnia would have terrorized Yaya's mind back in the day, but not now. In a stoneless existence, she didn't need to be running, running, running evening to morning.

When they were both exhausted and had made their post-coital restroom trips, Doc had pressed her back to Yaya's chest and fallen asleep. The cleft's teeth poked Doc's skin. Not biting down, only holding with care, as if to remind her that Magenta was here.

Yaya spent the night watching Doc sleep. She faced away, but an eyelid fluttered at the corner of her face. Her chest expanded, shrank. Bristles of short hair trembled under Yaya's breath. When she inhaled, she noticed Doc's scent in a way that felt like the first time, as if Yaya couldn't appreciate it before. Strange, different in some unidentifiable way, but not unpleasant.

She had never enjoyed this stillness before. When morning at last roused Doc's first conscious breath, it seemed too soon.

She noticed Yaya and settled again. "You keep surprising me," she said, her throat dry.

Last week's Yaya was a skin she'd now shed, erasing the woman who'd once run from Doc's side. Magenta had only been teeth then. Now her thoughts and feelings traveled Yaya's mind, and her sensations traveled Yaya's body. Every inch of her had turned sensitive in the best of ways. Even guilt felt better than before, realer and firm.

Doc had her own stones to bear. Not depressed, far as Yaya could tell, but she wished Magenta could help scatter Doc's burden, too.

"What I am," Yaya said, sliding an arm around Doc's waist. "I'm not the first. What happened to the first?"

Doc licked her lips. "I killed her."

Yaya's next heartbeat came slow. "Why?"

"Because they told me to."

No need to ask who *they* meant. "If they told you to kill me, would you?" Yaya asked.

Doc stretched her legs toward the foot of the bed. One calloused heel scraped down Yaya's skin, barely a paintbrush's stroke against her carapace patch. Its nerves seemed asleep, the only insensitive piece of her body.

"Don't make this more than what it is," Doc said when her stretch finished.

“And what am I making it?” Yaya asked. “What about Magenta?”

Doc didn’t answer, but the air danced between the muscles of her back and the skin and teeth of Yaya’s cleft. If these encounters were only sex, nothing more, Doc would have turned Yaya and Magenta over to ABP already.

No, Doc cared. She could pretend she didn’t, but her assertive mask had slipped between sleeping and waking. Whether she liked it or not, she had feelings.

“Did you know magenta’s not a real color?” Yaya asked.

The corner of Doc’s lips drew over her jaw in a smile. “Color isn’t real,” she said. “We see light, and that interpretation makes color.”

Yaya traced her finger in warped shapes down Doc’s thigh. At first, they were sloppy triangles and circles, but then they curled like Magenta’s arms. “She’s hurting,” Yaya said. “In a certain kind of way. We need your help.”

“For peanut butter?” Doc asked.

Peanut butter, Magenta echoed. *Big peanut butter.*

“Big peanut butter,” Yaya said. “That guy at Jumpies—can you do it again? But this time, bring him to us.”

Doc shifted as if uncomfortable. The conversation was stirring her brain the rest of the way to waking. “Meaning?”

“Do you need me to say it?”

Doc reached for Yaya’s arm and slid it off her thigh. “You don’t need what you think. There’s a specific amino acid or neurotransmitter, something you’re missing. We can isolate it.”

“In the lab?” Yaya leaned over Doc’s ear. “What happens there, Doc? Do they load me with the double-zero virus like my mom, fertilize my eggs, make ABP some mega-chimeras?”

“INZ9-00 is never getting out.” Doc sounded weary. If she wasn’t up for an argument, why fight one?

Yaya couldn’t quit. “But they’ll cut me, right? Organ bits, bone marrow. I couldn’t walk out the door after, right? ABP won’t chuck me the keys to my IP rights and say I own my body, hair to heel. Even you don’t really own yourself, and you work for them.”

Doc’s voice took on a breathy tone, a cry in her throat. “Why don’t you just run? There’s a whole world outside the northeast. Worse places, better places. You could disappear.”

Yaya had never left the tristate area, but it wasn’t like the internet didn’t link every land together. No passport, but there were other states. Some of them were theocratic nightmares. Others sounded too good to be true. She had heard there were no cop tanks in California, but residents said that reputation

exaggerated the greatness of the Golden State. There were parts of America where the dogs of ABP wore collars and leashes. They couldn't invade homes or compel Sibs checkups. Some chimeras died in peace. They weren't injected with mystery drugs.

But then, Magenta had led to so many good things.

"We'd miss you," Yaya said, planting a kiss in Doc's hair. Her chest drew away from Doc's back, leaving creases in the skin from crocodilian teeth. Magenta's tentacles slid out from their folds, buzzing static through Yaya's nerves, but they weren't for her. They slung around Doc's waist where Yaya's arm had rested.

Doc didn't press them away.

Yaya's voice took on a whisper. "Do it for us."

"This is manipulative," Doc said. She ran her hand across one of Magenta's wet limbs, stroking along the barbs so they wouldn't puncture her palm.

"You'll kill when ABP wants," Yaya said. "Doc, roll over. Doc, sic. That's a good Doc."

"Don't taunt me."

"I'm sorry." Yaya kissed Doc's hair again. "We don't even want you to kill though. Just bring. Like you were going to bring me to ABP. Bring us someone."

Doc's pulse quickened against grasping tentacles. She didn't need to say a word; Yaya felt the answer coursing through Doc's blood. She pressed at Magenta, guided her to lower places. Yaya let it happen without interruption. This moment was between Doc and Magenta.

Yaya instead stared at the ceiling and thought of what she'd had to do to keep the stones off her mind this long, kept her from feeling restless or crushed. She thought of that bathroom, the blood and the body.

It might have soothed Doc's conscience to know that Bryant Peters was technically alive, but better she thought him dead. If she learned what had really become of him, she wouldn't bring anyone to Magenta.

16

Doc lingered beside her car, a crumpled printout clutched in her fist. The patient name read DOCIA HALL, and she hoped that was its only error. She never pressed anyone outside her social circles to call her Doc; even her father still called her Docia. The printout also told her good news: clean screening, no cancer. Come back in a year.

ABP had scheduled the appointment long before Yaya came into Doc's life, and there was no throwing it away over Magenta's appetites. Every year since Kentucky, Doc visited one dermatologist or another for her skin cancer screening. Most patients would've preferred to get their negative test results by email, text, or even phone call, but Doc knew that if the results were positive, she would be asked to appear in person. She'd know without being told. Better to see the results in ink and paper personally.

One day, the printout would offer bad news, effects of chemical and creature finally catching up. Nine years clean, but she couldn't expect health to last forever. No one could. For all Yaya's Sibs-related griping, she forgot that chimeras weren't alone in mandatory checkups or arbitrary death clocks. Everyone died. An unlucky few stressed about it first.

When Doc felt less deflated, she finally answered Greenwich's last text, telling him she'd gone home and crashed and hadn't seen his urgent request until morning. If not for her mandatory doctor's appointment, she would come in, but no arguing with mandatory, right?

Outside her car, she awaited a catcall or a hand to stroke her spine unbidden, but it was too close to midday, and the air was bitter. No one seemed eager to bother her here and now. She would have to go elsewhere.

Downtown was bustling, as always. Pedestrians darted between shops, their breath misting even as the noon sun hung overhead. This summer had been especially hot for the northeast, and every meteorologist predicted winter's pendulum would swing hard the other way.

Doc believed it. She felt the cold.

She felt warmth, too, standing in the crisp November air. Magenta's arms. Yaya's arms. Doc would be in bed with them now if she hadn't had to come out. They were expecting she pick something up for them.

One younger white man, probably in his twenties, caught her eyes and smiled in passing. There was a pretty Black woman with a septum piercing who grinned in Doc's direction, and she raised her hand in a friendly wave when she noticed Doc looking.

Doc turned away. Last month, last year, absolutely. Not right now.

No one else glanced at her. Whatever allure she'd held for the asshole who couldn't keep his hands to himself last night—clearly busy, clearly not in the mood, some irritated vibe that couldn't be measured or quantified—she didn't hold it now. That, or the men who passed were better than the man who'd slid a hand down her back unbidden. Better than Bryant Peters.

Was Yaya going to leave an open-skulled corpse in Doc's apartment? Would Magenta have devoured Bryant wholly given the chance? She and Yaya had been hiding in his house, possibly for days. The cops might have interrupted some greater digestion in progress.

After a couple hours, Doc returned to her car. Her ears and nose were chilled, her hands scaly. She thought first of calling Yaya and telling her that delivery was cancelled tonight, except Yaya's cell phone remained in ABP custody, and Doc had no landline. She then thought of texting her friends and asking for a couple of local exes' names. Gwyn was mostly into men, and her last ex-boyfriend had been especially shitty. Or was it sexist to largely focus on men? What about Trina or Precious?

This was the wrong direction. Friends would misread Doc's intentions if she went hounding for their exes' numbers. Worse, their going missing or turning up dead would leave an obvious trail.

The phone buzzed against her palm, and she gripped tight not to drop it. A call from the Board, on her day off. She supposed she shouldn't answer on principle, but she didn't want to ignore them until Monday either.

"Agent Hall," one member said, whichever he was. "Asset loss needs asset recovery."

"Every day?" she asked. "She's just one chimera." It felt strange to dismiss Magenta as mundane.

Especially when the Board didn't buy it. "Unique asset. Sizable growth potential. Genuine results."

Doc gripped her phone tighter and clenched her teeth. "Yes, I'll pursue a line of inquiry."

They sounded satisfied, the smoke from their dragon nostrils puffing against the phone in a calm cloud. The call ended. What the hell did they want so badly? They couldn't know about Magenta by evidence alone. Genuine results might have referred to mutations in Yaya's cells or a reaction to her last Sibs station injection in October. Doc doubted the Board would tell her. *How?* and *Why?*—irrelevant words.

But they had given her a better idea. Her thumb scrolled from her personal

friends' numbers to a separate contact list. Different, distant names. To find one of these and take them away—it wouldn't be much different from work.

~

A few phone calls later, Doc waited in her car outside Avery Park. Space metal band Cosmic Centaurs thrummed from the radio, singing of ravaged cities and a love found at the center of destruction, a summer song the stations wouldn't let die until Christmas music overtook the airwaves. The park's population looked sparse, dotted by dogwalkers, couples, and a few elderly who sat on benches to read newspapers and feed pigeons. Dusk was closing in.

And here came Connie Winfried, auburn hair and blue scarf lashing in the wind. She wore a dark coat and jeans. Most importantly, she lived on the other side of the park. Were her cellphone location route to be traced, passing by Doc's apartment building would not seem suspicious.

Doc waved Connie over and let her into the car.

"I need to ask a few questions before I take you anywhere," Doc said, eyes fixed on her phone. She noticed Connie nod from the corner of her eye and went on. "Have you used any sedatives in the past twenty-four hours? Anything from NyQuil to morphine." A head shake. "Any strange growths?" Another shake. "Can you tell me the last dream you remember?"

Connie furrowed her brow. She was young, probably in college. One eye was a bright blue, almost as pale as Doc's, the other sea-green.

"It was a couple nights ago," Connie said. "I was studying historical Welsh folklore and didn't know I fell asleep until I was walking in the Pines. Somehow, I was back home, my parents arguing about whether I'd brushed my teeth, even though I was still a sophomore in the dream. I tried to shout back, but everything was train noises. When I woke up, the train was going by."

"Sensory incorporation," Doc said.

"Guess so," Connie said. "Why do you need to know that?"

"Psychological profile." Doc forced a satisfied grunt, as if that made her lie official and true. The dream question was her personal trick to lower a chimera's guard. No one ever wanted to hear another person's dream, but they loved to tell their own. An open ear made the dream-teller feel they had found some special connection. Yaya had been too ornery for it to work.

Connie was more cooperative. "I thought you wanted me to see something, not take an exam," she said with a calm smile.

"Contamination prevention protocol," Doc said. She pulled the car onto Green Street and made a U-turn at the Bruen intersection. "I need a chimera's

point of view on a confidential AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical situation. A chimera who can keep a secret. Your profile reads best."

"Do I sign a waiver?" Connie asked as the car pulled up outside Doc's apartment building. Her profile said she never tried to dodge her mandatory checkups, never even asked to reschedule. Obedient to the bone. The Board would have loved her.

"We can't risk a signature trail." Doc fixed Connie with a hard glare. "Be warned. If you talk, we'll know."

Connie gave an enthusiastic nod. "But this doesn't look like a lab."
"That's what everyone thinks."

Connie's blue and green eyes lit up. "Oh, damn. That's so smart."

Doc agreed, something to mention to the Board. Next time they wanted a secure lab, they shouldn't put it in a glass skyscraper where they had to then block up most windows.

"Have you ever heard of the Kentucky Incident?" Doc asked, leading Connie up the short steps and through the front door. Doc doubted Yaya would pop up behind them with scissors this evening. She and Magenta would be on good behavior upstairs.

"You mean the statesmen thing?" Connie asked. "My friends online, they try to sneak info to Kentucky, Alabama—"

"That's not what I mean." Doc wasn't sure what she meant. ABP had burned away most evidence of the Kentucky Incident with such relentless fire that the town's name was lost to ashes. How would this sweet young woman have heard about what squirmed in Doc's nightmares?

She sometimes tried to pierce through that awful night to the days before the dragon, when Camille was just another poor girl from Kentucky, her heart filled with pain, adrift in high school halls, where her peers, family, and watchful authorities deep-down knew she wasn't like them. A girl who liked girls. A chimera.

In the end, she hadn't quite fit the definition of human anymore.

Doc would never know what happened at that high school dance, whether there had been some *Carrie*-level prank or whether the straw of an awful comment broke the camel's back. Camille might just have decided of her own accord that she'd had enough. By then, the impact of whatever injection she'd been given had taken a monolithic toll on her insides. Her only relief was to let the changes loose. She killed everyone she knew and loved and hated. Sources said her father had gone to the school to find her, and she'd killed him too.

She would've killed more had ABP not sent their agent to the school. Against that wall of pale tentacles, Doc had seen no choice but to put an end to

things.

But Camille had a choice. She let her walls of flesh part, let Doc close enough to talk. Camille could've crushed Doc and absorbed her body the same as she'd done to everyone in that high school. Nothing forced her tentacles, after their talk, to let Doc go back to the statesmen, where she betrayed Camille's trust in a cloud of poison.

That was what Doc had dreamed about last night. Thoughts and memories that Magenta had aroused, a price for their pleasant evenings together.

Doc led Connie to the elevator. "It might be easier to show you."

Connie nodded again; she was going to get a sore neck someday. Or would she?

The TV was on, running a news program. Doc waved Connie inside and then shut and locked the door. No mistakes, as much as she could manage. If her plan failed and Magenta turned Connie into another battered body? She was young, but she'd lived longer than the girl from Kentucky.

Life wasn't fair nine years ago, and nothing had changed.

"Still doesn't look like a lab," Connie said, taking cautious steps inside. "Is there a lever you pull where the wall opens up?"

"Something like that," Doc said, fumbling with the zipper of a small fabric case. "Toward the bathroom, it looks a little different."

Connie turned toward the bathroom and then halted. Doc was about to urge her onward, and then she saw what had made Connie stop.

Yaya stood in the bathroom doorway, only a few feet from Connie. She was topless, and her cleft's widening maw pressed her sternum open and her breasts to either side, letting red limbs slide out. They danced in a soothing rhythm, a bed of kelp snared in the ebb and flow of unseen ocean waves.

"Not yet," Doc hissed.

But Yaya—no, Magenta was eager. Her stalk of pinkish muscle prodded the cleft's edges. Black horns pressed pink folds apart.

"Look at that," Connie said, her eyes wide with astonishment.

No choice now. Doc tore the syringe of morphine free from her small case. "Yes, Connie," she said. "Look at her, and tell her the dream you told me."

When Connie's mouth opened again, Doc plunged the needle through her skin.

17

Bryant Peters died an hour before Doc came home. He did not look the same as his body, left to rot in his bathroom. Yaya thought he looked like the bottom of a cleaned-out jar of peanut butter, every spoonful and peanut fragment already devoured.

The stones clambered onto her mind within minutes. They had missed their bed.

If only genuine peanut butter would work. Its protein might fuel changes, but right now Magenta had a craving for something more complex and a bit chunkier. *Peanut butter*, she hummed.

"We need new slang for this," Yaya said.

Big peanut butter.

"You already called it that."

The dryer chimed, packed into a closet with the washer, but Yaya didn't throw on her laundered lavender suit yet. She needed more open air time in Doc's borrowed underwear, Doc's silky robe, more lounging. The stones weighed on body and mind alike. Yaya didn't even climb up from Doc's chair when, mid channel flipping, she spotted her face on the news.

"—in the brutal murder of a west Newark resident," the voiceover said. The photo came from Yaya's state ID. She looked as miserable as anyone who'd spent four hours waiting at the DMV. "Police are searching for this woman, 31-year-old Yolanda Betancourt. Neighbors and authorities report having seen her trespassing on the victim's property shortly before the murder scene's discovery."

Discovery, AKA taking days to get a warrant. Yaya could've ground the body into chum and chucked it into the Hudson, food for polluted fish, before the cops returned.

"Reports from AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical state that Betancourt is being sought for questioning and possible biohazardous material theft."

Yaya flipped the channel again in search of cartoons. Enough real violence; she wanted wooden mallets and falling pianos that played "Mary Had a Little Lamb" or "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" when the keys popped out of their victim's mouth.

The cops were searching. Somehow, they knew. Not like she had cleaned Bryant's house, but without an arrest record, her fingerprints shouldn't have pinged any database. Of course, cops didn't pull these strings. ABP kept every minute detail of Yaya's existence on file, and because they owned a stake in her

body, they could share all they pleased.

Had the cops put out an all-points bulletin at the direction of AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical? An ABP from ABP. Yaya began to snicker, and each time she ran it through her mind, she laughed again. For the first time in her life, everyone wanted to find her. Everyone cared. They wouldn't look to her when she used to scream, but now that she was the cause for screaming, suddenly everyone gave a damn.

Voices drifted down the hall outside Doc's apartment door. Doc was back, and she wasn't alone.

Yaya's grin stretched, and Magenta squirmed. *Big peanut butter*.

Which meant they should ditch the old jar. Yaya charged into the bathroom. She'd been dreading this part since she and Magenta first cracked Bryant's skull open, but relief came immediately after, so she'd stopped caring until now. She couldn't help thinking of days ago when the puddle of bird bones had dropped from inside her body. Doc must have taken out the trash before the remains began to smell. Yaya would have to hope for the same this time.

"Let him go," Yaya said. "He's gone."

Big peanut butter, Magenta hummed. Tentacles writhed beneath folds of skin.

"It's coming, but we have to drop—"

The door shut hard. Yaya should have done this earlier, but she hadn't wanted to miss even a scrap of Bryant. He would've wanted the same.

Too late. She stepped into the living room and watched Doc tense, panic, and thrust a syringe needle into the base of a young woman's neck, skin pale, hair brownish red. She collapsed into Doc's arms.

"Help me move her," Doc said. "It'll go cleaner in the tub."

Magenta was impatient, her limbs already reaching from Yaya's cleft. Yaya couldn't blame her. Shared nervous system, shared pain, and probably shared depression. The mental stones were both of theirs to bear. In a few minutes, those stones would fall away again.

"Not yet," Yaya whispered. "We help Doc first."

She grabbed the young woman's legs and helped shuffle her into the bathroom. They laid her gently in the bathtub, her head resting against the cool wall opposite the faucet.

"Connie," Doc said.

Yaya didn't need to know that. She would've like to know Bryant less when she'd dragged him into his bathroom and let Magenta feed. Not out of guilt—that vanished with the stones—but he was an unpleasant person. Better off dead.

This one probably wasn't. Her head lolled to one side, facing out into the bathroom. Her eyelids fluttered, half-opened, closed again.

Wait, what color were her eyes?

Yaya squatted beside the tub and batted Magenta's eager arms from the rim. She thumbed open one of Connie's eyelids and then the other. Blue eye. Green eye. Not everyone with two eye colors was a chimera, but every chimera had two eye colors.

"Really?" Yaya asked.

"Would it be better if she was some random woman with complete heterochromia?" Doc asked. "She's who I could get my hands on."

Yaya batted Magenta's tentacles again and stood from the tub. "Not her."

"Why? Because I didn't bring a man?"

Yaya turned to face Doc. "You were supposed to bring some sleazeball like last night. Chimeras put up with too much of ABP's shit already."

Doc scanned Yaya, from where her cleft began between her legs to where it peaked beneath her neck. Her eyes fell on Yaya's face last. They looked crisscrossed with red map lines. "Like it or not, Yaya, you're part of ABP's shit these days. Both of you."

"But—" Yaya looked to Connie, eyelids shut, but Yaya saw them in memory. Sky-blue, sea-green. "She doesn't deserve it."

"Then don't kill this one," Doc said, a shrug in her voice. "Take only what you need."

Yaya swiped both hands down her face. "You don't. Understand. What we need."

"Neither do you." Doc neared Yaya, their faces inches apart. "But if you come to the lab, you won't have to hurt her. We'll find out that special thing, and there won't be any others like Bryant Peters."

Yaya flinched away, almost stumbling over the tub. "You picked her special, huh? Someone sweeter."

Doc lowered her eyes.

"If it comes down to lab or murder, I'll—" Yaya didn't know. Her tongue ran over her teeth. She hadn't expected Doc to trap her like this.

"If you got away from ABP, free and clear, what would you do with your life?" Doc asked. "Maybe we can work something out."

"You have no power with them," Yaya said.

Doc leaned in, leaving Yaya nowhere to retreat. "There's leverage. You're a unique specimen, and they're probably at fault. All they need is some confirmation—"

"Have they tried Catholicism?"

“More jokes.” Doc shook her head and stepped back. “You’ll never believe me, but you don’t have Sibs. I’ve seen thousands of dossiers.” She reached for Yaya’s cleft.

Against Yaya’s will, Magenta reached one red limb between teeth and folds. It curled against Doc’s palm and slithered around her fingers. No one had ever touched Yaya with such tenderness. If she didn’t know better, she would’ve thought Magenta loved Doc.

Did she know better?

Doc had fondness in her eyes. “Does she look like death to you?” she asked, gaze fixed on Magenta’s tentacle. “Your leg was hurt and then healed within hours. You were threatened, and now Magenta protects you. You’re processing some substance or molecule that makes you sharper. How is this not healing? You’re changing into something new and beautiful and incredible, and you can do anything you want. Don’t waste your life nursing pain.”

“Is that what happened to the last one like me?” Yaya asked. “Because it sounded like you killed her and stalked off without a hitch.”

“We’ve had other unique specimens, but there’s a scale, and you’re near the top.” Doc let go of Magenta’s arm and ran a hand down her forehead. “Do you think my skin was always pale? My hair white? I was a brunette once. Do you think my eyes weren’t a fuller blue? I didn’t used to drink spiced chai and eat chili and Thai. These days, if it can’t burn holes in asphalt, my tongue hardly knows the difference between food and plastic. ABP chemicals did this, mixed with pieces of that girl from the Kentucky Incident, the last unique specimen anything like you.”

Yaya looked Doc over, and for once really looked. She never asked about other people’s appearances, never questioned brown-skinned women at the bars where they were from, wasn’t that kind of white lady. Doc had been a pretty face and a stern personality that first night. Most women Yaya looked at were beautiful; she didn’t know how to see otherwise. Yes, Doc was paler than normal. Sure, her eyes were different. Everyone was different, everyone gorgeous.

It really didn’t matter what had happened to Doc after all that. “You’re still alive,” Yaya said. “But that girl from Kentucky? She’s dead. You killed that chimera.”

Doc glanced at the tub, where Connie’s hair now draped the rim, and then steeled her eyes back at Yaya. “Well, now you get to decide if we’ll have that in common.” She turned and left the bathroom.

Yaya followed. “Where are you headed?”

“If you’re going through with this, I’m not watching.” Doc grabbed her

purse and opened the apartment door.

Yaya didn't try to cover her cleft. "You don't have to leave though. Hide in the kitchen with headphones and music or something. Run the TV up. After I'm done, we can—"

"What am I to you?" Doc asked. Her eyes had turned from steel to the coldest ice.

Yaya couldn't pierce them. She could only ice her voice to match. "You're the one who said not to make this more than it is, right?"

"Right. I've been wondering, do you even enjoy me? Or is it just Magenta?" Doc didn't wait for an answer. She shut the door, soft but firm, and her footsteps disappeared down the hall.

Magenta's tentacles lashed across the living room, but Yaya stepped back to keep them from reaching the door. "Let her go," she said. "She wants to go." Leaving had been Yaya's usual since long before Doc came into the picture. She didn't chase. She ran.

And sometimes she staggered, back to the bathroom in this case, to Connie. Soft breath whistled in and out from her parted lips. A chip cut a slender triangle from one of her front teeth, and Yaya thought that was cute, and then she shook the thought away.

"We can do this," she whispered. "A little off the top, that's all. Doc's right. We don't have to go all the way."

But it wouldn't last. The only way to keep the stones off her mind was to make some permanent changes to Connie's skull, same as Magenta had done to Bryant's.

Except Bryant was a bastard, and this young woman—maybe she was terrible, too, but Yaya couldn't know. Bryant had instigated, made it clear that he had some seedy underbelly, and though Yaya hadn't had the tenacity to uncover it, she'd seen his eyes when he approached. That was not his first time threatening a woman in his house at night, keeping her sandwiched between his body and a locked door.

Yaya still felt his hand at her chest, and she opened her cleft to rub the sensation away. It was time she and Magenta let him go.

Torso teeth spread wide, and Magenta's arms lapped at both sides as if bracing a doorframe. Yaya thought again of the bird, but what slid from her insides fell dry this time, a hard lump coated in strawberry jam. It thudded softly on the bathroom tiles.

The husk of Bryant's brain.

Yaya had grasped his head in her bare hands and cracked open his skull against his bathroom floor. Magenta then took over, opening the egg, gathering

the yolk, drawing it into their organic cooker. The brain had lived inside Yaya's chest since then and offered a constant supply of whatever the hell made the stones go away. She had spent the last three days with a clear and unburdened mind. Digestion didn't end until today.

Connie's brain could give another three days. Maybe more if Magenta adapted to make it last longer. She could do that. She could anything.

"She'll never miss it," Yaya said, turning back to Connie. She couldn't say whether Bryant's brain had been conscious inside her. Had he felt hers and Magenta's shared nerves? He didn't deserve the pleasure. Connie, though?

If Doc hadn't wanted this, she should have brought that guy from the Jumpies lot or someone like him. His kind filled the city. Yaya would go hunting herself when the stones went away and she could think straight.

Magenta reached for the tub again, and this time Yaya let her. Tentacle tips scratched at Connie's coat sleeve. Its fabric snagged on Magenta's barbs and tore away. Her sweater sleeve had bunched up inside, revealing her forearm. Nothing would stop Magenta this time.

"I'm sorry," Yaya whispered. "I'm really—"

Connie's skin burned Magenta, like dry ice, a chewing cold that cut Yaya's words into a clenched-teeth scream. *Eeeeeeee* rang in her head, Magenta screaming, too. Only Connie lay silent, the morphine keeping her oblivious to anguish as her skin went stovetop hot under Magenta's touch.

Red tentacle fused to Connie's flesh. Not stuck against each other, but mixing and merging, earth absorbing water to make mud.

Through her tears, Yaya couldn't tell which digested which. She tugged at the tentacle and cut her palms on Magenta's barbs. Every pelvic and torso limb flailed, slashing at shower curtain, porcelain, clothing, Yaya's skin. She scrambled back, tugging the tentacle with her.

Flesh stretched in painful strands beyond the bathtub rim. Tentacle lifted from arm, the gap between them a web of moist pink bubblegum, and then Magenta's limb tore free in ragged ends.

Scared, she squealed.

"Me too," Yaya said, coughing. She cradled the injured tentacle against her chest. Blood bubbled down her fingers and cleft, into her underwear, onto the floor, everywhere. Her forearm wiped tears from her eyes. What had gone wrong?

Connie remained unconscious. Yaya thought to put a bandage on the bleeding arm, but her muscles were still seizing with Magenta's agony.

The tentacle crawled inside the cleft. It would heal soon, but it wouldn't forget. If there was some adaptation around this, Yaya hoped Magenta would figure it

out quick. Connie wasn't going to work, her lucky day. They still needed someone.

Tonight.

Yaya splashed water over her face and hurried into clothes and coat, still warm from the dryer. She then bolted out of Doc's apartment and into the night.

18

The pain was raw. She would be distracted if she didn't heal, but to heal she needed what she'd be distracted from.

More than anything, she needed to stop the agony. That was the whole point, right? No stones, no crushing, no pain. Pain distracted. She could see clearly when the pain was gone.

Fire surged through her limbs. Adrenaline. The human body had remarkable means for detouring pain into power. That was how she'd come to be in the first place, wasn't it? Every learned experience was a fragment of pain, and if she'd learned to pull one scumbag to pieces, nothing could stop her from tearing apart every asshole in Newark, New Jersey.

Across one street, a sparrow flitted around a streetlamp. Peanut butter?

No, not that. No birds. That was a rule.

But the big peanut butter? Those wandered everywhere. A few feet ahead, a man walked past a tree. When he turned at the corner, she followed. When he crossed another street, she crossed behind. He had a big peanut butter ball in his skull, and bless the sex gods, she could taste it, and when she went home, the sweetness would return.

But was the sweetness right? Was she being sexist by picking him out?

He turned and noticed her. Deep in his peanut butter-filled skull, he hadn't forgotten that long, long ago, he was a lizard, a rat, a prey creature, and his kind had adapted to know when eyes followed him. Damned eyes. Big mistake, five hundred million years ago. If she didn't have eyes, he wouldn't have felt her watching him.

"Ma'am?" he said. "You alright?"

Ma'am wasn't even her name. He was no good. Something in his skull was too wary, and besides, she didn't want to be sexist. She turned away from him, darted down another block, across another street.

Ahead, a woman. Her vermillion coat swayed in a gust of chilly wind. Headed toward someplace familiar. Yes, this was Bruen Street. Dancing lived in this place, and music, a song of writhing bodies and bitter drinks. Fulki was here, flashing smiles and scowls, both deserved. Neon lights glowed blue—no, pink! No, maybe magenta.

And what Bryant had said four nights ago about colors didn't matter—no one ever listened to an empty peanut butter jar left abandoned on a bathroom floor.

Magenta was alive. The color was real.

19

Most standing tables at Pandora's Aquarium stood bare tonight, while dozens of dancers writhed on the dance floor, desperate for heat against November's chill. Few had been dancing last time Yaya stopped by, the music more sedate. Pandora's Aquarium must have opened right at sunset to be this rambunctious so early.

Fulki manned the bar, same as last Saturday, her eyes smiling bright in her dark face, but her mouth worked only for patrons. Until Yaya approached the bar, they wouldn't speak, and she had no money. She was here by Magenta's pull, nothing more.

That didn't stop others from approaching her. "Where've you been, pretty love?" Fluffy Hair asked. "You slipped off last week without a goodbye." Their face was all pearly teeth and bright brown eyes and a nose that crinkled in a cute way. They wore a studded black vest and maroon pants.

"I'm slippery," Yaya said. She then slipped toward the overcrowded dance floor and set eyes on people she'd never seen before.

But wouldn't someone here know her face? She had been plastered on the TV screen for twenty seconds, and she was probably showing up in newspapers, online articles, social media. Most people ignored all that, but not everyone. Odds suggested at least one person here had seen her. She wasn't going to make this work.

Doc was right this morning—Yaya should have taken Magenta and run. But where? And for what? Yaya had never planned a future. Surrender would be easiest. At least someone would get what they wanted. An ABP agent, an executive, some Frankenstein in a gas mask.

No, these were the stones again, crushing her mind at full force. Life couldn't take the whole blame for them either. If ABP wanted half the rights to Yaya's body, then they had to accept half the blame for laying these stones, too. The double-zero virus, chimeras, Sibs—all their fault. They'd sung a dismal song in convincing Yaya she had no future.

She wouldn't follow their tune one more minute.

The Pandora's Aquarium tide tossed the crowd in its flotsam and jetsam, and Yaya danced into it as fluid as water. Her hips rubbed strangers' thighs and dipping hands, everyone too caught in the music to notice her face. She was a black shape under neon lights.

A narrow woman crashed into her front, one hand pawing for purchase against Yaya's breast. "I'm sorry, real sorry," the stranger slurred. Her face

climbed Yaya's chest, oblivious to the quivering cleft beneath. "Oh man, you're pretty, huh?" She was too drunk to tell.

"That's not what the mirror tells me," Yaya said. She'd read that written on one of her mind's many stones.

The stranger cough-laughed into Yaya's face. Her breath stank. She sent wandering hands to Yaya's hips and gave a hard slap on both sides. "These! These are precious. You could make a lot of babies with somebody."

Yaya leaned close. "Could be you if you buy me a drink."

The stranger didn't hesitate—she pressed her lips into Yaya's, a sloppy, drunken kiss that sent a bittersweet tongue between teeth.

It couldn't be this easy. Yaya kissed back, uncertain, but this was happening. If Doc could roll with Magenta, Yaya could do the same with this stranger. The kiss went harder, the stranger losing her balance. Yaya's teeth ran down wet lips. Wetter lips.

The stranger gave a muffled squeak and tore backward. "You bit me?" One hand rushed to her lower lip. "Shit, you really bit me." She looked to Yaya now as if she'd never seen her before, the stranger's mental coin flipping from drunk to sober in an instant. She cursed under her breath and staggered from the dance floor.

Blood lit a spark through Yaya's tongue. Her jaw trembled, nipping at bloodless air, but the stones were falling already. Relief would be short-lived, but she grabbed that clarity and clung for dear life. She thought to follow the stranger, make sure she drifted from the dance floor's oceans and into safer waters, but there wasn't time. She had to ignore her better nature and focus on herself and Magenta.

Fluffy Hair appeared at the dance floor's edge. They didn't smile when Yaya approached.

"Sorry for running just now," Yaya said, firm and loud. "This is so embarrassing, but I think I was too drunk last time we met to remember your name, and I've just been calling you Gorgeous in my head since. But then I saw you again and panicked. Could we start over?"

"No." Fluffy Hair looked stoic for a long moment, and then a grin slid smooth across their face. "But you can keep trying. Name's Sabin. Never even gave it to you, stranger."

"Sabin." Yaya tasted each letter, laced with a stranger's blood. "I like seeing you more when I know your name. When I don't know, it's like being buried under anxiety stones."

Bright teeth shone in Sabin's grin. "A cairn."

"Cairn." Yaya tasted this word, too.

“They bury people under stones so animals can’t dig up their loved one and eat the body.”

“I thought they did it to stop the dead from coming back.”

Sabin covered their mouth with one hand, their laughter a fresh percussion beneath the music.

Yaya swept close to Sabin’s side. “Right now, the cairn’s fallen off, and I’m coming back. Dance with me before I die again.” She opened an expectant palm.

Sabin lowered her hand into it and let Yaya pull them close.

The music thumped a heartbeat through Pandora’s Aquarium. Yaya led Sabin into the dance floor’s deep end, where the throng of dancers flowed thickest. They swayed inches apart at first, but there wasn’t room for chastity here, and Yaya wasn’t into the chaste scene anyway. Sabin pressed their chest to Yaya’s without pause, slid back, turned around, pressed their butt against Yaya’s hips. The dance floor was an ocean, and Sabin was a thrilling squall.

But the stones came crushing again. If only Magenta would adapt to stop caring about them—but then, that’s what Magenta had done about the blood. The organs. Every adaptation made Yaya stronger.

Lights flashed with the music’s pulse, draping Pandora’s Aquarium in blinking shadows. Still rocking her hips, Yaya lifted her top to expose her midriff and let Magenta’s tentacles stretch out. One found a glass bottle and swept traces of saliva into the cleft.

Nothing. It had to be blood, and more. Yaya had stripped everything she could from Bryant’s body—let Magenta strip, really. She wouldn’t take that much from anyone in Pandora’s Aquarium. Best try Doc’s suggestion, a little off the top, just enough from each dancer to make a difference. A stone cast aside here, rolled off there, and Yaya could feel whole for maybe another day.

Flesh ropes slithered through the dance floor and found gaps between dancers, snakes in this ocean current. They would not ask much. No one noticed, not even Sabin, their eyes closed, their grin ever radiant.

One barbed tentacle scratched the small of a dancer’s back, barely a bug bite. Another scratched an exposed collarbone. Scarce marks, a few drops from everyone. The tentacles returned with meager offerings, dipping into Magenta’s mouth, Yaya’s mouth, her cleft.

Every bit helped. The tentacles slithered out again, one at a time, returning, out again, easily dismissed as a strobe effect beneath flashing neon.

A voice cried out here, and then there. They felt the barbs, Magenta growing greedy. Yaya, too. She cried out with them, at first in pretend, and then in solidarity. Everyone should cry and scream tonight, a communal pain that the

dancers could all talk about later over drinks and tears. One big Magenta bite.

Yaya placed her hands on Sabin's shoulders, pulling them close, and let Magenta curl one tentacle around their front. "I like you," Yaya said. She hoped Sabin wouldn't notice the scratch. Magenta's arm touched Sabin's midriff.

Their skin was a hot stove, melting the surface of Magenta's flesh.

A scream ripped through Yaya's throat, and she barely sealed her lips in time to stifle it. Fire ate her nerves.

Not again. Sabin was like Connie. Why? What difference did any of it make? It didn't matter, Yaya decided. The mistake burned and froze flesh to flesh, whatever the reason.

Except Sabin wasn't asleep like Connie. Sabin was awake and shrieking. The music still pounded, but it couldn't drown that noise. Everyone turned, some panicking.

Yaya didn't hesitate with gentleness this time. She urged the barbs to spring from Magenta's tentacle, cutting the flesh to free it and leaving bloody tissue behind.

Neon and music quit their heartbeat. The lights went up through Pandora's Aquarium as Yaya and Sabin crumpled to the dance floor, still shrieking. Sabin cupped their middle with one hand and wiped furiously at their eyes with the other. A wet circle flitted past their fingers.

A colored contact lens.

When Sabin looked up, tears filling their eyes, one was the same deep brown Yaya had seen earlier. The other looked much lighter.

Sabin was a chimera, same as Connie.

Yaya cradled tentacles, ragged and screaming as if pried from a paper shredder, and wished to wring the necks of everyone at ABP. Something about the double-zero virus, maybe a surface-level Sibs, made chimeras off limits. Magenta was allergic to this particular peanut butter, and she hadn't adapted to it since Connie. Gene-deep, maybe she never would.

Yaya clambered to her feet, dozens of eyes falling on her. Tentacles writhed in all directions, their barbs nicking clothes and scraping skin as they withdrew into their toothy lair.

Screaming filled Pandora's Aquarium as boots clattered across the dance floor, between tables, out the exit, a stampede that knocked one woman to the side. She caught herself on the bar and kept running. Sabin was among the last, their hand still clutching their middle. They didn't look back.

"Wait," Yaya said. Too late; the dance floor stretched empty, its blood well run dry.

Except behind the bar, where Fulki stared with wide, black eyes. "Don't,"

she snapped.

Yaya turned her way. “You too?”

Fulki’s arm snapped with cobra quickness around the neck of a beer bottle. She smashed its bottom against the bar and aimed glass teeth at Yaya. “Don’t touch me.”

Yaya extended open palms. “Fulki, please.”

“I’m not into that shit.” Fulki wagged the bottle, biting the air up and down. “Whatever shit it is, I don’t want it.”

“You know me,” Yaya said, stopping two steps from the bar.

“And?” Fulki’s hands were trembling, and twinkling glass snow rained over the bar. A glower reshaped her face. “You want a pass just because I know you? It’s always been trouble on your end, and I’m not here to make you feel better. Get lost.”

Magenta’s limbs squirmed, a nest of hungry snakes. Yaya could lift her top and let those snakes spill over the bar, glass or not, toward Fulki. They would know each other better then.

Blood coated Yaya’s abdomen and palms. If she left now, someone on the street would notice. She rubbed one hand down her face and smirked at Fulki, a whisper in Yaya’s brain telling her that she’d picked up the gesture from unsavory sources.

She wouldn’t do this to Fulki. She was better than that. “Need to hit the ladies’ room, then we’re gone,” she said. She skulked past the bar, its wall dressed in queer memorabilia and Pride flags, and pressed open the ladies’ room door. “Sorry, Fulki. If it matters.”

Regret stroked Fulki’s eyes, but she didn’t lower her broken beer bottle.

Yaya sank into the ladies’ room. Its mirror reflected overhead light and the semblance of Yaya’s shape.

Another woman stood in front of the sink, a denim vest wrapped around her body. She was young and checking her hair. “Everything okay out there?”

Yaya stared, unmoving, until her muscles coiled through her chest and down her abdomen. Magenta’s snakes were growing too large for their nest. She burst loose, all teeth and limbs. The young woman in denim staggered back from the sink and then bolted out of the ladies’ room.

Pretty, Magenta said, recoiling into Yaya’s chest.

Yaya scrubbed cold water at her face, palms, and midriff, careful not to touch the cleft. Its teeth seemed longer and thicker, her overgrown vagina sharpening by the day. The cairn piled onto her thoughts, each stone heavier than before, as if relief from their weight was a drug that lost effect with every dose. She needed to make the best use of her clear mind while it lasted.

She was big peanut butter, Magenta hummed.

"We'll find you a thesaurus," Yaya said. "You can learn your own words."

I know my words. What do YOU know?

"And what if she was another chimera?"

Magenta wriggled. *Poor Sabin. Should we be scared too?*

A sound like thunder pounded in the distance, but not from the sky. Another kind of storm neared on tank treads and steel frames. Someone had called the cops by now, and the cops might have called worse. If they were coming this way to get Yaya, then they knew where to look.

"How much trouble do you think we're really in?" she asked. Magenta didn't answer.

Yaya pulled her borrowed coat tight and found it shredded, the tentacles having sprouted too fast. She would have to brave the chilly November night anyway. Maybe Magenta would adapt to keep them warm.

The mirror offered one last glimpse at herself before she leaped into whatever hell waited outside Pandora's Aquarium. Shredded coat, disheveled lavender suit, her face aged a decade in a day. She got a good look at her eyes.

Her once-hazel right eye had finished its prismatic shift. Both eyes shined full magenta.

20

A harsh wind snapped at Yaya's face the moment she stepped outside Pandora's Aquarium, a warning to go back in. She had to keep moving, and where she went didn't matter beyond that. She hit the sidewalk and glanced left.

Down Bruen Street, past the Elm intersection stoplight and halfway over the next block, blue and red lights haunted dark, distant lanes. Yaya couldn't make out clear shapes from where she stood, but she knew those flickering beacons on sight.

Cop tanks.

"Don't push me," Yaya hissed under her breath. "You won't like what pushes back."

They didn't look to be moving, but they might have been maneuvering around a smaller vehicle, indiscernible in the dim. She glanced right, where the night seemed solid, fewer lights breaking the darkness. A smattering of pedestrians ambled between streets and along sidewalks, their breath misting in the cold. Yaya glanced left again.

The blue and red lights flickered, approaching the Elm intersection.

Yaya turned right at a brisk walk, all willpower bent toward looking casual and disinterested. No one would recognize her if she studied the sidewalk at every step.

A couple approached, clasping each other's gloved hands. Neither made room for Yaya, and she had to stand aside, wait for them to pass. That was fine, she told herself. She was in no hurry. The Green Street intersection down the block formed a wall of blackness, its stoplight glaring green at the moment but its streetlights either shut off or obscured. If she reached Green, she could dodge around a corner and disappear into Doc's place. Connie might have woken up, or Doc had returned. Small problems; Yaya could handle them.

A hand pressed her arm, telling her to slow down. Magenta stirred in Yaya's chest, a growl in her ears, but Yaya rubbed a hand over her lavender jacket as if calming a stomachache.

"Got a cigarette?" a gruff voice asked.

Yaya didn't look at the man. Her eyes shifted over one shoulder, back to the Elm intersection, where cop tanks formed black outlines beneath a glaring red stoplight. "I don't," she said, nudging past his hand.

"No harm, no harm," he said. "Sorry to bother." His withdrawing footsteps sounded loud in the cold air.

Yaya focused again on the Green Street intersection. Its loving blackness

promised she could disappear, and both cops and ABP would be none the wiser. Magenta still quaked. Yaya didn't know how to tell her the man had meant no harm.

She was two-thirds of the way up the block when a putrid yellow eye opened at the Green intersection. Another opened beside it, and then another. A series of yellow lights climbed a panel formed of steel piping. Grease dripped from every surface. With the vehicle alight, Yaya now made out smokestacks to one side, enormous gear-like tires underneath, and the suggestion of a shaft that grew from the machine's front and glowed with sickly amber light.

A horrible metallic horn roared across the night. This vehicle was in pain. It would unleash that pain on anything it touched.

Yaya had never seen anything like it, but she doubted ABP had kept this thing a secret. Likely she hadn't paid attention to media about it, having accepted this monstrosity as a normal thing that would never affect her life. That sounded like her.

She turned around, slower this time, to head for the Elm intersection.

Blue and red lights flickered at the block's end. The cop tanks were crossing the intersection, and there was no traffic to stop them. They crawled because they were in no hurry. The cops inside had to know she was here with no way out. Bruen Street's buildings pressed together on this end, and she would have to run toward the cop tanks to reach another alley. They would see her. Cops had likely already closed off the area.

Yaya turned around again and faced the ABP abomination. No blue and red lights danced nearby. The powers that be sent this one vehicle to block the Green intersection.

She could get around it if she dared get near. She took a step.

A ring of amber light shined at the base of the machine's shaft. An electric *whump* pounded the air. Another ring bloomed to life above the first, and then another. Each climbed narrower than the last, and each hummed with power.

The hairs stood up on the back of Yaya's neck, and the rest followed down her body. Static laced the air and climbed her skin, a storm ramping up for violent lightning as if bolts might shoot from her fingers.

But she didn't think that would happen. Only ABP's machine would fire.

Metallic teeth grated each other as the shaft pivoted. Its pylon aimed down Bruen Street, every ring alight with hateful amber. Its electric hum took a deep breath.

Yaya's skin crackled, the air stinging with heat. She shuffled toward the nearest brick wall and curled into a ball at its foundation, poised on the toes of her shoes.

Thunder screamed across the night. A yellow sword of light slashed overhead, peeling bricks far over Yaya's head. Debris rained down on her in a white and red cloud. She scuttled away, dust coating her suit and stroking her throat. She started coughing, eyes stinging. Above her, someone was screaming.

Magenta's voice slid through the din. *Blood on them. They want me dead. They want you dead.*

Yaya wanted to calm Magenta, but an electric hum choked the words in her throat. The death machine's rings bloomed again with light. Its pylon now aimed her way while charging, the glow encircling it, an amber iris to a steel gray pupil.

The death machine ramped faster this time, its engine warm.

She scrambled on all fours and then onto her belly at the sidewalk's edge. Her suit scraped pavement as she crawled beneath a slender parked car. The friction made her chest ache, but there wasn't time to seek better shelter. She wasn't sure shelter existed from that thing.

Thunder screamed again. This time she felt the sword of light, its terrible fiery heat all around her, choking her in a different way from dust and noise, the air too dry to breathe.

The car ruptured. One tire burst, its air blowing against her side. She dragged herself out just as the undercarriage snapped apart and its steel frame heated to dripping molten slop. Fire raked across its seats, dashboard, and hood.

No more time for subtle escape. Yaya dodged into the street and crossed before the steel frame burst, shattering nearby car windows and setting off every alarm down the block. Pedestrians huddled against trees or dashed mad for an unlocked building. As if that would protect them.

The death machine's yellow lights curled around half a dozen lined-up silhouettes. They wore gas masks, same as Doc and her team, and carried weapons that Yaya couldn't make out. She didn't want to, either. This was as close as they would get. She turned around again and headed for Elm.

Cop tanks crawled behind a solid line of cops. Armored uniforms shimmered in the tank lights, each face hidden under hard, expressionless masks. Yaya couldn't see what they held any better than the ABP agents' weapons, but at least she would understand them. Nightsticks, teargas, pistols with live rounds. The cops were ready for her,

Every muscle in her body sighed with exhaustion. "I'm not in the mood."

The death machine screamed bloody murder again, and this time she thought they'd managed to kill. Light carved down the street, through the corner of Pandora's Aquarium, shattering one wall and drawing down the roof on one side. Bricks rained over the sidewalk. Someone screamed and then cut short as

the bar wall crashed toward the line of encroaching cops. One dodged out of the way; another disappeared under the avalanche of debris.

Fulki had hopefully rushed out the back already. Yaya would never know.

Magenta squirmed so hard that Yaya's chest ached. *I smell their hate.* Yaya's face contorted, her pores opening as if her skin could sniff the air. *They want to touch us. Hurt us.*

Magenta wasn't making perfect sense, but she told Yaya what she needed to know. "Maybe we touch them instead."

There were too many cops, but the ABP agents were few and their death machine was powerful yet cumbersome. Close enough, it couldn't hurt her. She could dodge around it without the agents knowing where she'd gone. They would have to carve open the entire city to find her.

Electricity sang up the death machine's shaft as another sword of light pierced Bruen Street. Its blade arced down a tree to Yaya's right. Heat seared her arm, peeling away its lavender sleeve. The tree flared in torchlight.

A high-pitched shriek chased the death machine's thunder. Yaya spotted the man at the tree's base just as his skin sloughed in amber light, the glow dripping through muscle and bone. She shut her eyes when he fell forward, his scream only a windy echo, and his body hit the pavement in a wet pile, like slimy bird bones on a bathroom floor.

Yaya's bicep burned red. Did ABP think these were warning shots or did they mean to kill her? They would have no meat for their labs at this rate.

Magenta slithered through Yaya's limbs. *Touch them back.*

Yaya ran fast as she could toward the ABP agents and their death machine. "Give a big smile to your corporate sponsors," she said, doubting anyone could hear her besides her friendly parasite. Sarcasm, her only defense when hopelessly outmatched against a rain of hellfire.

But then, she'd spent her life outmatched against AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical. A giant steel dick that squirted some Marvin the Martian heat ray was only their latest jab at her since the checkup injection, since the Congressional approval that they partly owned her, since the release of the double-zero virus in the first fucking place.

The agents fanned out. Streetlights glared in their glassy gas mask eyeholes. They were getting ready.

She didn't know if she could ready herself, but nearing them was her only chance. Doc and other agents might have been acceptable collateral alongside the rest of the population, but ABP wouldn't fire on their own.

She hoped.

The nearest agent raised a black stem and squeezed its trigger. Flames

spouted in a curving blade and danced through the skeletal branches of another tree-turned-torch. Yaya froze until the spitfire faded and then charged at him.

She'd held scissors to Doc's neck, blood pumping half this hard, and Doc meant something. This gas mask-wearing creep in a yellow jumpsuit? He was nothing. He didn't even have a face.

One fleshy coil shot out from beneath the hem of Yaya's clothes and twisted around the agent's neck. Another grasped the weapon's stem, but then wrenched back at Yaya's yowling. Its touch burned Magenta's flesh, one cursed nervous system to share between them.

"This is your goddamn fault!" Yaya shouted. She hugged against the agent and began punching his throat. The hazard suit material dented at each blow. "You Frankensteins injected me with this shit. Don't do the mad science if you don't want Magenta!"

Her captive buckled against her. The flamethrower's shaft clacked against pavement. She wanted to grab it, wield it against the other agents as they gathered around her, but her captive fell onto it. There wasn't time to dig it out. Within a few steps, the encroaching semi-circle of agents would block her in, pinning her to the nearest wall.

"You did this to me, and now I got Sibs," Yaya said. "Just let me die in peace."

She couldn't tell if she heard the gunshot before she felt it snap through her shoulder. The bullet was a seed, and it dug painful roots bone-deep. She doubled over, shrieking, but she couldn't out-shout a gun.

All gas masks turned toward the line of cops and their tanks. One agent raised an open palm, while another pressed two fingers to the side of the gas mask and grumbled something Yaya couldn't discern.

The distraction was enough. She gripped her aching shoulder and staggered toward an apartment building's front alcove, breaking line of sight with cops and agents alike. The agents didn't mind dishing out friendly fire, but they refused to take it. Maybe both forces would fight each other and give Yaya an out.

Escape seemed unlikely. She doubted she could retreat safely from this alcove, let alone up the street. A few more steps, and the agents would see her. Their death machine could create a clear shot if the agents wished.

Her suit was truly ruined now. She wasn't sure why that mattered, but the thought occurred to her and wouldn't let go. Tentacles flailed from the hole in her sleeve, out her collar, and from beneath her jacket. Hard to believe they had lovingly held Doc just this morning.

Their touch hurts, Magenta hummed.

"Bullets do that," Yaya said. Her curls caught in the blood and stuck there.

“I’ve never been shot before, no chance to adapt. Kind of scary, huh? They might’ve got us.”

One agent stepped into view. They kept their distance, but their arm beckoned the others.

I’m here, Magenta said. Half her flesh ropes coiled against Yaya’s trunk and hugged tight. *If you knew you were dying, what would you do?*

Yaya leaned against the apartment door. A keycode panel told her it was locked, but she guessed that running inside wouldn’t do her much good anyway. An electric *whump* echoed, the death machine ramping up again. Warning shot, or were they aiming to kill this time?

“You tell me,” Yaya said. “If you knew you were dying, Magenta, what would you do?”

A ripple worked up Yaya’s chest. *I’d stop*, Magenta said.

That made Yaya smirk. *Stop what?* she asked. *If you knew you were dying, you’d just stop dying?* Her voice didn’t sound right. Why was that?

Yes, Magenta said. *Stop dying. Stop holding still. Stop pretending.*

Pretending what? Yaya asked.

Magenta’s hum went softer. *Stop pretending to be human anymore. Stop pretending—*

A sharp point pierced the back of Yaya’s injured shoulder and tore through to the front. Muscles seized down her spine. A black bolt jutted from beside her collarbone, its front barbed so that the only way to tear it out would to be grab the end and pull. Her fingers gripped, started to try, but every inch took a mile of bloody misery.

Wires twined from the bolt’s tail toward one ABP agent, who clutched a looping contraption between gloved hands. The connection made Yaya think of a rudimentary stun-gun, something a whaling sailor might have cobbled together a couple centuries ago out of a harpoon, copper strands, and chance lightning to electrocute the sea.

The agent didn’t need chance. His rubber-coated fingers pulled back a wooden lever.

Sparks flew, and an electric surge soaked Yaya’s muscles. Her body screamed blue lightning, and the edges of the world blackened.

Magenta’s limbs snaked around the bolt and jammed it back out of Yaya’s shoulder in the worst way. They screamed together as the bolt dragged muscle through the fresh hole in Yaya’s suit. It clattered to the ground. Every movement was pain, but there wasn’t time to grow a carapace over bullet and bolt wounds.

Magenta reached out. She wanted necks to strangle and snap inside yellow hazard suits, for eyes to bulge behind gas mask sealant and glass. Yaya

remembered Bryant, the way he'd gawped and shrieked at the sight of Magenta's teeth. He hadn't even seen her at her worst.

Yaya tore open the front of her jacket, buttons flying, and yanked up her top. "This is what you want, right?" she shouted. "Scared yet?"

Her words turned to belligerent nonsense, but she wouldn't stop shouting. Better to go down swinging. Her cleft rippled open, and Magenta poured out, a virile, muscly stalk colored her namesake, the teeth stretching into a snout. She resembled a crocodile more than ever before.

The agents stepped back in unison. One rewound wires into the lightning contraption, its bolt clinking along sidewalk slabs.

Yet another electric hum sounded from Bruen Street's intersection with Green Street. How many shots could the death machine fire before it overheated? In November's cold, perhaps it was near immortal. In January, it might never stop firing. It already felt like it never stopped.

Yaya needed five minutes without its awful noise. She could ask why she'd spoken through her bones like Magenta. If they could have a moment to themselves without ABP planting flags of conquest in their DNA, maybe her life would make sense just once before it ended.

Thunder rocked the night. Yaya didn't see the sword of light at first and wondered if the shot had gone wide, strayed into some distant neighborhood, and sliced its little apocalypse there instead.

But the building quaked. The death machine was aiming this way. A cloud of white dust billowed into the street, obscuring the intersection and agents.
Yaya could vanish in that dust if she darted into the cloudy street right now. One last mad dash for the death machine while no one could aim right or catch her. She charged from the alcove and turned toward Green Street.

Too late. The electric scream hadn't settled. Amber radiance glared down on her, a furious sun like she'd never seen in the day.

And then she saw nothing.

21

The Board called Doc in first thing Sunday morning. Did they never rest? Extreme circumstances had struck the city last night, but they didn't involve her as far as the Board knew.

Why then was she summoned to the Warren Street skyscraper? The Board had to know something.

No steel siding blotted out the sky at the penthouse level. Even the elevator shaft turned transparent, giving a brief glimpse of the city's busy streets. A corridor led Doc to twin mahogany doors, where plush benches hugged the walls. She wore no hazard suit, gas mask, or rubber boots today. For once inside an ABP office, she could be as close to a person as the Board might see. The kind of person they told to roll over, or sic 'em.

A voice bellowed through the doors: "Agent Docia Hall."

And like a good Doc, she heeled. But Magenta had been a bad dog, so they'd put her down. Life was simple to the Board.

Stepping before them, Doc realized she was not the good dog in this scenario. Maybe she'd never been good, evidence of which lay on a steel gurney at the room's center, its legs ending in tiny pivoting wheels. Warm overhead light reflected off a plastic body bag.

Connie's auburn hair shined beneath the foggy plastic. Her eyes were shut. Doc couldn't guess why the Board had ordered the body here, five feet from the visitor's seat, unless they saw visitors and the body as two of a kind.

She sat in the chair, its wood creaking. The room was large, round, and sparsely furnished. Doors stood to either side, probably offices, lounges, and restrooms solely for the Board, but no one except a cleaning crew would ever see. To everyone else, the Board was as infallible as the building in which they held office. No one would see them anywhere but at their seats of power.

Doc hated speaking with them on the phone, but at least then, faceless and pumped full of corporate rhetoric, she could imagine speaking with a three-headed dragon on its hoard of gold, King Ghidorah lording over his scales. Facing them was worse.

Three ordinary men wielded ABP's power, the children of Zeus glaring down from a glassy Olympus. Behind their raised desks, a plaque coughed up ABP's slogan as if to remind all visitors of the authority behind their three little thrones: *AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical, making your world a better place*. Doc hadn't believed those words since the Kentucky Incident.

She didn't know the Board's names. They were gray-haired men in black

suits. Left wore glasses, Center wore a long beard, and Right wore both. She wondered if they swapped accessories for each visitor, every element of their presentation a falsehood.

"Thank you for coming, Agent Hall," Center said, as if Doc had a choice. "We'd like to discuss a few things, even understand them."

"Asset recovery, mixed results," Left said. "Near unprecedented asset. Intellectual property infringement—"

Center raised a hand. "We can drop the jargon for now, yes?"

Left furrowed his brow and adjusted his glasses, unsure how to speak otherwise.

Center folded his hands together. "Where to begin? The unique specimen was killed a few hours ago. One of yours—Agent Greenwich—helped the Predator Engine crew collect the remains while law enforcement secured the scene."

Greenwich must've felt like a hero, clinging to the side of the greasy steel beast as it rained hellfire down Bruen Street.

"When Agent Greenwich realized you lived nearby the scene, he decided to report to you himself," Center went on. "He found your door ajar. He suspected foul play, went inside, but instead of you, he found her." He cocked his head in the body bag's direction.

Connie's skull was not broken open and emptied out, which meant Yaya hadn't finished with her. What had happened last night?

Doc cleared her throat. "How did she die?"

"That's the main reason you're here," Center said. "Educate us."

Wasn't that just like the Board? When she had explanations, these three men were all *hear no evil* toward manhours, science, and realistic expectations. Now, when she'd been caught abusing her position for the first time in her career, they were all ears.

"The cause of death, specifically," Doc said.

"Blood loss," Left said. "Severe lacerations to left forearm."

Doc wondered if he took that personally. No, he probably saw himself as the right head of this monster. "You want to know why Greenwich found her in my apartment."

The members of Board leaned over their desks. Could dragon heads wear vulture faces? Doc supposed so. Dragons could look like anything because they weren't real. Except the Kentucky dragon, killed in a cloud of breath worse than any serpent of legend could have spit. She had worn a teenage girl's face. Vultures weren't out of the question.

Doc took a deep breath. "I pursued the line of inquiry, as noted yesterday."

The Board turned their collective heads in unison. “She’s deceased,” Center said.

“When I left her, she was alive.” Doc turned to the body bag. This was Yaya’s handiwork. Did she know she’d killed this woman? Of course not; she was dead and didn’t know anything anymore. And she’d had help.

Doc couldn’t think about that in front of the Board or she would crumble apart. She had to be steel.

“This woman was a chimera,” Left said. “You seem to have forgotten that AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical shares fifty percent of intellectual property rights with each individual chimera. That’s mandated by Congress, Agent Hall.”

“And where did this line of inquiry lead you?” Center asked.

Doc’s job dangled by a thread. Were Yaya still around, she’d have said to let it sink, a ship past its prime and long overdue for drowning, though she probably wouldn’t have used that analogy. She’d never had a career, either.

This was the only life Doc knew. She had to try. “It led me to the Theseus paradox.”

The Board held stiff as statues, their faces uninquisitive. To ask for an explanation was beneath them; they wanted knowledge laid out on a silver platter. Doc fixed her eyes on them and avoided the body bag.

“Acute zygote manifestation syndrome, or Sibs, occurs when the consumed sibling DNA rejects the other,” Doc said. Her voice sounded disconnected, not her own. “Commonly, the body tears itself apart. But in Yolanda Betancourt’s genes, there has—had to exist an unknown factor that not only grew new anatomy, but adapted to survive Sibs by swiftly shedding its own genetic material.”

She didn’t mention how consuming protein had readied Magenta for further adaptation, more imaginative metamorphoses. Doc doubted they had seen those changes’ true potential before the end.

“And this triggered out of the blue?” Center asked.

“She had an injection at her October medical checkup.” Doc almost bit her tongue to stop, but she was damned no matter what she said. “A possible catalyst.”

“And Theseus?” Right asked.

“Yes, Theseus,” Doc said. “When his ship is battered, his crew repairs it. But if, over time, every piece is damaged, then none of the original ship remains.” She paused and let the Board absorb this. “Over the course of seven years, the human body replaces every cell. A philosopher might say that means you’re physically distinct from the you of seven years ago. A much more insufferable philosopher might ask if you can really be the same person at all

now that every cell has been replaced. The Theseus paradox."

"How does this apply to the unique specimen?" Center asked. His glasses fogged, and he took them off to wipe their lenses.

"Let's be reasonable. Seven years being so gradual, a person must be the same self. But what about full cellular replacement in seven days? And with additional metamorphoses? Throw a mind in the mix and hit blend, and you have a whole different situation."

"But these genes—" Center started, and then glanced at his desk. "What came out thought it was the same person?"

She, Doc wanted to correct. "Wasn't she the same? A perfect copy of Yolanda Betancourt's brain wouldn't know it wasn't her. Doubtful human biology, even in mimicry, was meant to divide so frequently. That's why she manifested new growths. New adaptations."

The Board members glanced at each other. Tiny smiles of satisfaction prodded the corners of their mouths.

"Was it human?" Center asked.

"Genetically," Doc said. "She would have passed a blood test had she held still that long. Her shape and structure? Anything but human. Chimeras are used to their outsides and insides being mismatched on a genetic level."

"The trouble with typical chimeras is technically only half their genetic code belongs to us," Center said. "We can only do tests. This one? Unique specimen? That likely begins with the double-zero virus, which means we own the copyright to what remains."

There, the angle. Doc had pleased them. She cleared her throat and pulled the Board down from the clouds. "What's been recovered then?"

"Pieces," Right said. "Enough."

"We've entrusted their study to be cross-referenced with genetic material from the Kentucky Incident," Center said. "We'll find commonalities, and then we'll purchase similar data from hereditary analysis sites. DNA/ABC. Ancestors Online. Anywhere they collect blood and compare family trees. They need the licensing funds anyway."

"Assets acquired," Left added. "You understand."

Yes, Doc understood. As the saying went: Every dog has his day, but never the unappreciated woman. Someday, they would let her see the remains, but not until they'd been flayed and dissected and tested in every conceivable way. What was left of Magenta could then join what was left Camille and the Kentucky Incident in the Display Hall. After that, Doc would be allowed to visit.

Through a pane of glass.

"Did we get the results we wanted?" Doc asked.

The Board couldn't hide the joy from their faces. "Fast-tracking," Left said.

"The regenerative promise looks sound," Center said, trying not to beam. "No one ever knows how these injections might process, but the October 12 experimental group looks to have reacted in unprecedented activity."

Doc remembered mention of a control group the day she'd led her team to Yaya's apartment. "You introduced a variable at Yaya—Yolanda Betancourt's medical station on her October 12 checkup, yes?"

The joy faded from the Board's faces. They didn't look ready to disclose.

But Doc wasn't ready to let the subject drop. "Their experimental injections didn't affect their immune systems. Most of those chimeras grew teeth, nothing else, while Betancourt added on the tentacles and violence. You were testing—what was it, a regenerative drug?"

Center clasped his hands together. He was smiling again, the sheepish kind of a child caught browsing the wrong website. "Seven years is a long time to regenerate every cell in the human body, Agent Hall. Consumers would pay good money to heal faster."

No wonder Yaya had skipped her November mandatory checkup. Like she'd known ABP's scientists cared less about curing Sibs and more for using her presence to experiment. And why wouldn't she have known? She didn't trust ABP.

"We'll work to filter out those tentacles, that violence, but we're right to expect others, yes?" Center asked, shifting in his seat. "First Kentucky, now this? Repeated results."

Doc tilted her head as if sliding a thought into place. "There's always a possibility," she said. "It's a zygote-eat-zygote world."

The room chilled, and she wished she'd looked to the floor, kept her mouth shut, acted like anyone but a good Doc. She could heel, roll over.

Fetch.

"We'll have the list of chimeras who received the same injection distributed to all available teams," Center said. He nodded to Right, who began working at his desk. "Investigations into every chimera."

A few dozen Sunday mornings were about to come crashing down in banana suits, gas masks, and company vehicles prowling Newark. Whatever lives any of those chimeras might have lived were now afterthoughts to ABP's scalpels.

The future itself was only another specimen to dissect. ABP took everything.

Doc was dismissed. Connie remained. Yaya and Magenta were some nebulous floating particles sweeping on the wind and whatever flesh ABP had

scraped from Bruen Street.

Doc wondered what the two of them had looked like by the end. Greater metamorphosis. She shouldn't have walked out, but Yaya had acted so disgusting and, much as Magenta fascinated Doc, she was the cause. Change could be rationalized into the same category as puberty, an unknown variable thanks to the double-zero virus, worsened when two different minds shared a body. Behavioral differences were inevitable, conflict unavoidable. How could anyone find ground to stand on for the Theseus paradox when two brains had been forming in separate regions as if establishing their own sovereign organic nations? They were one who was two and then, what? One, or none?

Too much for Doc to absorb right now. At what point had that woman ceased to be Yaya alone and become both Yaya and Magenta? Had they lived, what would they have become?

But they wouldn't live. They were dead. Whatever they were once becoming had ended in the street and in blood.

three: wayward organic matter

22

Was there a word for nightmares that came nightly? Doc knew adjectives—frequent, recurring—but what about a single word that told the whole of it?

Minutia. A good guess, except then she lived the nightmare day by day. Checking boxes, knocking on doors, listening to briefings, reading memos, and generally making chimeras' lives miserable by reminding them their eventual fate, Doc's white visage becoming a pale rider from November into December.

Her nightmares—recurring, eternal, minutia?—never showed Magenta. Instead, the girl from the Kentucky Incident stared into Doc's eyes as she spent nights tossing and turning. When she could sleep, the nightmares woke her again. Their repetition kept Camille fresh in Doc's head from morning to evening, home to work and back.

She didn't really belong anywhere, that was the problem. The sidewalk, her car, restaurants, bars, her kitchen table—alien, hopeless places. She couldn't escape that sense of unbelonging even when she slept. Camille's eyes always stared, filled with Doc's failures great and small, from Kentucky and beyond. Doc couldn't help anyone. Either she took a hand in destruction or she stepped aside to let it through.

Like with the other chimeras. Mid-December, mandatory checkup truancies mounted, a few dozen Yaya wannabes. Yaya might have gotten herself and Magenta killed solely to avoid her December checkup, too. Doc almost laughed at that.

She recognized some absentee names from the October 12 injection list, chimeras who had been discovered with genital teeth in November.

Christmas stretched its dark shadow over the sky. She spoke briefly with her parents and deflected their insistence about when she would next visit. When they asked if she was seeing anyone, she made up a fake girlfriend, Tanya, which felt more pathetic than telling the truth.

One morning before work, she stopped at a florist and then drove to Yaya's neighborhood with a bouquet of flowers she'd called "those ones." She asked the florist not to explain their meaning in the language of flowers. Their petals were pink and red, all Doc cared about when she parked at Yaya's block and laid them on the concrete beneath a brick wall.

Doc had seen flowers left on Bruen Street after November 17. She had thought to leave hers there. Ruined Pandora's Aquarium was where she and Yaya had first met. Fulki and the other owner were processing insurance claims and had fled Newark in the meantime.

But the Bruen Street flowers had been left for the police officer killed by friendly fire, and Doc didn't want her intentions mistaken by leaving flowers there too. These were for Yaya and Magenta, and they belonged at Yaya's home. No one else thought to mourn them.

Doc pursed her lips and let breath steam from her nose. The flowers wouldn't last long. Why bring them? A month had passed since the deaths. Leaving these was a sign that she wasn't moving on. Had she even touched the stages of grief? Psychology lingered outside her areas of expertise, the human mind as mysterious as the stars.

She thought of heading up to Yaya's apartment, but by now it had been cleared out, her fridge stickers scraped off its door, her few belongings either sold or thrown in the dumpster. Time to walk away, drive away.

And maybe never stop.

Doc's gaze flickered to a man dressed in a thick coat, his gloved hands working at his phone's camera. He was trying to take a photo of the Gemini mural. The paint had been defaced, Doc noticed. Someone had washed away one of the twins, but they'd had to stop before the end, likely chasing off some kids who were already painting a new mural down the block.

Gray snowfall began as Doc pulled onto Warren Street. Her weather app hadn't mentioned anything, but what else was new? Near the office, she braked three cars back from a stoplight, where a billboard blinked across one office building.

It read: *Cellular Rejuvenation Sessions, a revolutionary new treatment coming soon from America's most trusted corporation. AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical, making your world a better place!*

Research had come that far already. The phone buzzed, work likely wondering where she was, but Doc only grasped her phone, not answering. She was going to hold it close, and tight, smother it if she liked. ABP could take their urgent calls and late shifts and stick those in a lab, see what purpose or promises they gave. At worst, someone would chastise her for ignoring them.

ABP had done worse. She'd helped them do worse.

In the lobby's changing room, she donned gas mask, banana suit, and rubber gloves and boots. There, identity cleansed. For the rest of the day, she didn't have to be a real person.

She began at the Display Hall, as if lost. Her gas mask reflected in the window pane set over the Kentucky Incident remains. Though Doc had aged these past nine years into mean bones and a hard woman, Camille had been preserved. Her sameness would outlive everyone.

"They're done with you," Doc said, trying to sound comforting. When they

were done with Yaya, could she at least look forward to some similar liquid permanence?

Memories stomped down Doc's spine and made her shudder. Was there a word for nightmares that came in the morning? Dawn-mare? Hers came riding up while staring at the glass, ignoring her morning responsibilities so that it might beat its hooves across her brain.

She was back in Kentucky, the school's gymnasium filled with pale, pockmarked tentacles. They had already torn down outer walls and tangled with fallen rafters. ABP and statesmen vehicles had cordoned off the area, their lights glaring across the school's scorched lawns and parking lot. In the old dreams and older reality, Doc had walked up that lot. The monster everyone feared had let her through.

But in this dream, Doc was the monster. Her skin, blanched by the chemical clouds mixed with Camille's dying spores, now stretched into those arms and surrounded her, a pale cocoon. Secure, quiet, afraid.

Someone was coming, but she wasn't Doc. Doc was the monster in the school who didn't make sense anymore and had to be destroyed. She had never made sense, and so her form had turned to nonsense. She couldn't withstand the temptation to become a tentacled dragon, ripe to be slain.

And just who was that woman in white now crossing the charred fields? Poisonous clouds hid her face from afar, a mist that shouldn't have been released until she was walking away, the dream switching players' roles and telling the acts out of order.

Had Camille taken on the role of dragon slayer? Or was it another chimera, her eyes once blue and hazel, then turned magenta, and then melted away by ABP?

Doc's mind would keep doing this to her. Maybe the same testing lab that studied what was left of Yaya and Magenta could sort out Doc, too, if she would only give them permission to crack open her skull and let secrets dribble down.

She headed there next, several floors up the Warren Street ABP skyscraper. She would have plenty of time for paperwork at her desk as the day dragged on, but first she wanted to finish her brief vigils. With dutiful behavior, maybe the nightmares would stop.

The testing lab was a wide, round room, one stretch of wall filled with computer monitors, another with cabinets above several steel worktables. Samples might be taken to the analysis lab, but technicians and researchers here needed workspace for taking down immediate observations of their subject. Nearly a dozen yellow-suited workers bustled back and forth.

On the far side of the room, across from the twin sliding doors, an

enormous shell of hard plastic surrounded Yaya's remains. Magenta's remains? Doc supposed those distinctions were pointless now. The shell gave no privacy, every angle a window into the yellow pool where tissue bobbed, its red muscle exposed in teeth and tentacles. Electrodes formed a web of white wire from the pool's surface. A gurney let the remains be lifted and lowered as needed so that researchers didn't need to wade through the preserving fluid that kept their subject looking fresh.

Not from rotting. There was some debate over whether the remains should be called such. No one could decide for certain whether the specimen as a whole were alive or dead, only that some organ function remained and the cells continued to regenerate, albeit at a much slower rate than before their death. Or undeath. Magenta seemed forever beyond classification.

Unlike the Display Hall, the testing lab did not provide a place for quiet reflection, but today seemed busier than usual. A transparent plastic tube about the width of Doc's arm stretched from one side of Yaya's and Magenta's container and into a small transparent casket. One limp tentacle lay across that bridge. The casket was empty, but Doc assumed it wouldn't stay that way for long.

"If you're going to visit me every day, the least you could do is take notes." Agent Farrow appeared beside Doc, a smile in her eyes behind gas mask glass.

"I like seeing how the work is going," Doc said, hands at her sides. Every word felt fake. "They kept me at arm's length nine years ago, but I need to see this through." She nodded at the plastic casket. "Do we expect Snow White?"

"Trying something new." Farrow approached the casket. "We've introduced samples of Betancourt's blood from earlier this year into chimeras, just to see. No reaction. Tried introducing samples from the remains, same problem. Variables by the shitload, to use the scientific term."

"Of course."

"They want results upstairs. We have subjects to spare, and reintroduction of that October 12 cocktail hasn't produced anything conclusive. We want to see how Betancourt's remains respond to the direct approach." Farrow started toward the monitors.

Doc followed. "Subjects to spare?"

Farrow picked up a clipboard. "Chimeras. The others who received the October 12 injection. We're pretty good at either giving them pointless teeth or turning them into violent tentacle monsters, but the Board won't be happy until we find a middle ground. With any luck, we'll see some consumptive molecular symbiosis, or leveling out."

Doc's hazard suit doubled in weight and dragged at her thoughts. "Which

chimera volunteered?”

Blue monitor light reflected in Farrow’s gas mask. “They don’t volunteer.”

Her words dropped a shuddering chill through Doc. Detaining chimeras was sometimes necessary, but putting them through a full-on dangerous experiment was another level.

Or had it always been the same? Standing to one side of the testing lab, Yaya and Magenta floating dead or undead behind plastic, Doc remembered that this was the fate Yaya had feared from the start. She’d thought that if detained, *ABP Frankensteins* would cut her on a slab. Perhaps all chimeras feared dying this way more than Sibs.

“Get samples,” Doc said. “Not people.”

“Severed tissue isn’t working,” Farrow said. “Might be something in the central nervous system. We’ll see soon enough.” She turned to Doc. “The Board’s breathing down our necks, and you know how it is. They say, we do.”

Doc knew. She shuddered again. “Where?”

Farrow told her.

23

Over ninety people had been found with teeth in their vaginas, the first of Yolanda Betancourt's symptoms. For all anyone knew, they had over ninety similar unique specimens on their hands, albeit transforming at slower rates, if at all. Only cutting and prodding would tell, chimeras' wounds spilling a cornucopia of data. Legally, ABP had no right to hold any human being indefinitely, but they could argue Magenta as precedent that these were not human beings.

Never mind that while the October 12 injection was the common denominator for genital teeth, only Yaya's body had turned out anything like Magenta. She was the unique factor.

That hadn't stopped ABP from sedating and detaining these ninety-plus people. Another wide room stretched before Doc, two floors down from the testing lab. Steel beds filled the floor in rows, and people filled the beds. Tubes ran from their arms and blankets draped their bodies. Their eyes were closed.

If challenged, ABP would argue their case and purchase these people from the U.S. government through bribes, blackmail, and so on. Even if they were wrong, they could freeze any lawsuit in court for years while they slurped up the data. Nothing was solid in their eyes. ABP would always change the rules to suit them.

Though unmoving, each face reminded Doc that she was useless. She'd botched her chance to make a difference nine years ago in Kentucky, and then for Yaya, and now this.

Two yellow-suited agents followed Doc in and began adjusting one of the steel beds into rolling mode, the testing lab being its chimera's destiny. Doc approached the bed and lifted a chart. A driver's license scan read *Name: Sabin Delacroix*, *Sex: X*, and a birthdate of twenty-six years back. The pages beneath offered scant details of past medical history and prior ABP experiments.

When had Sabin last woken up? A scar tore across their middle, ragged at the edges. Was that a sample the lab had taken from Sabin's skin and applied to Yaya? Skin wasn't enough, of course. ABP was going to take Sabin's whole body.

"Leave them here," Doc said before she could think through her words.

One agent ignored her; the other glanced over. "Not up to us," he said. The steel bed's wheels unlocked, and the agents rolled Sabin away.

Doc watched them go and then turned to the room. If she hadn't seen the agents take Sabin, she wouldn't have noticed their absence from the rows of

steel beds.

Subjects to spare.

She should throw down her gas mask, hazard suit, and clothes, face them naked and confess. “I did this,” she muttered. “I put the thought in their heads. They had no idea how special Magenta was until I handed them the evidence, and then they thought you were special, too. But you’re not. You’re just people.”

She wondered how a resignation letter might turn out. Not well, she thought. The Board would laugh and say she wasn’t going anywhere.

And she wouldn’t. She’d let them thrust her into that whole Kentucky mess. Quitting would’ve been quicker, and she’d still have her old skin, hair, and eye tones, less worry about cancer, freedom from a mountain of guilt, but she’d stuck around. She was still sticking around.

Doc’s thoughts slid back to that meeting. The Board’s insistence for answers. Connie’s body, lying there in a plastic bag, a ragged tear up her arm, new since when Doc had left her apartment. Now that she thought about it, the wound looked familiar. Yes, she’d just seen it roll out the door from the chimera ward, hadn’t she?

Magenta had tried to consume Connie, same as Bryant, and then backed off. At some other point before or after Connie, Magenta had tried with Sabin, too. She wasn’t choosing to not hurt chimeras, she’d been willing, but they didn’t work the same as Bryant.

So what? Magenta wasn’t hurting anyone now. Doc tried to shake the thought away.

But it clung like her nightmares. So what? So, ABP agents were bringing a chimera up to the testing lab. They were going to stick Sabin in that plastic casket, where one of Magenta’s tentacles hung through, a tighter connection between organisms than any plastic transfusion tubes. Farrow would oversee the connection, and like a good scientist, she would record every interaction.

Doc ran from the chimera ward, fast as her rubber boots and hazard suit allowed, and chased the bed down the hall. She spotted it just as elevator doors slid shut to carry it upstairs, and then she darted for the stairwell.

No one upstairs understood what they had on their hands. Magenta was a believer in second chances. You only got to threaten her one way once, maybe twice if you were lucky. Doc wasn’t feeling lucky today.

Magenta adapted. That was what she did. She would adapt to touching chimeras. When the lab threw this one to her, she’d take her next chance. What would her body do?

Several floors up, Doc bolted from the stairwell and toward the elevator. She found it already heading down, having deposited its agents and unconscious

chimera. She rushed for the testing lab, clueless to what she would say, how she could convince them to stop. If Magenta perceived the chimera as a threat, would Farrow and the other researchers care? The remains were dead, or undead. If only the lab could classify them, maybe Doc would have an angle for convincing Farrow and the others to leave the dead or undead alone.

They only knew the Board wanted results. No matter the price.

A meek hum rang through the lab, some machine still powering up. The population of yellow suits had doubled since Doc's visit downstairs. Her eyes fell on the casket as two agents pressed its lid shut. Sabin lay inside.

"Unit secure," Farrow said. She pointed at one monitor, and then another. Her technicians scurried, and that meek hum in the walls gained soprano strength.

Doc pushed through the yellow crowd and spun Farrow around. "Shut it down," she said.

Farrow cocked her head to one side, awaiting an explanation.

Doc could only do so much. "Magenta's going to change. She won't do the same she did before. It's been too much time!"

Gathered gas masks now faced Doc. They had to think she'd lost her mind, and she couldn't blame them. She wasn't making sense.

The hum grew thunderous. Though nothing visible pierced the shell that surrounded Yaya's and Magenta's remains, the yellow pool bubbled and their conjoined flesh twitched. Power pumped through their electrodes. A jolt rippled down one tentacle from the main shell to the plastic casket where Sabin lay unconscious.

Farrow wasn't paying attention to Doc anymore. She looked between her monitors and the shell. "Let's see what she does this time."

The gas masks turned from Doc. She didn't know how to put into words that everyone present was making a mistake. If Magenta felt threatened—

The outstretched tentacle twitched. Its tip slapped at plastic and then dropped onto Sabin's arm, where its barbs snagged their skin. Likely this looked no different from the last time Magenta had touched Sabin and left that ragged wound on their gut, but there was no conscious Yaya to tear them apart if that was how the connection had ended before. Now the tentacle sank deeper into Sabin's flesh.

"Temperature flux," said one technician beside a glowing screen. "Enzyme transfer?"

"If we're lucky, we'll see reactive regeneration on the live chimera's end," Farrow said, addressing the room. "We can then study exactly what's changing on a molecular level."

“You have no idea,” Doc said. “It’s no different from the October 12 injection. We keep slapping things together, hoping they’ll stick, playing guesswork at function, but it’s the double-zero virus release again and again. We’re playing with sand to see how it might spill. It’s more substance abuse than science.”

Farrow didn’t get a chance to answer. Gasps filled the room, another melody beneath the walls’ hum, and Doc turned back to the shell and casket.

Sabin was liquefying. Their body became gel-like, their tissue a blanket of flesh around Magenta’s tentacle. The limb fattened from tip to root, a straw that briefly clogged the connecting tube until Sabin’s flesh passed wholly from casket to shell.

The room stilled. No one approached the shell for a closer look. One technician muttered about the monitors, but Doc couldn’t hear him, and no one was really listening.

A hairline of brown and red tissue climbed the inside of the shell. As it reached the ceiling, new fleshy tendrils sprouted up its sides, leaves to a fern. Each new tendril fattened, and soon the fern-like effect disappeared. The inside of the shell resembled a circulatory system separated from skin, muscle, and bone.

Magenta was forming a network before Doc’s eyes.

“It’s almost magic,” someone said. Any other day, Doc or Farrow might have scoffed, but today, yes, the lab was seeing magic. Magenta was a biological miracle.

Doc almost forgot she’d come with warnings. “Shut it down,” she said, but her voice was too thin and raspy. She had never seen another human being broken down and absorbed. Neither had anyone else here. She wondered if they could put themselves in Sabin’s place right now.

The shell’s circulatory system swelled. Each strand of tissue thickened against its sisters until the web curtained the interior, obscuring Yaya’s and Magenta’s remains. Their pool trembled, the remains moving harsher than electrodes could manipulate. They were independent.

For a brief moment before the tissue painted the shell beyond sight, Doc thought she spotted Magenta’s red stalk wriggle up from the yellow pool, teeth and horns and all.

An animal moan filled the shell, deeper and louder than the hum in the walls. Agents and technicians stepped back, but their rubber boots were silent for once, at least to Doc. That moan filled her mind. Beneath it came a familiar hum she remembered from nine years ago, the sound of a creature deciding it wasn’t going to stay dead or undead.

Time to live.

24

Consciousness was nearly impossible to gestate on its own.

Easier to mimic. Easier still to copy, piece by piece, over time, so much that she had forgotten doing it long before she found herself in this thick fluid between hard, sleek walls. She knew better now. Knowing better was a side effect of having to do it again and again. Every time the knives came, and cut, she forgot.

“Visual mass reduction beneath estimated levels,” a muffled voice said. “Removal in excess?” They were only ever knives and voices anymore. She hadn’t seen them since the amber light had taken her eyes.

“Weight difference negligible,” another voice said, muffled as the first. “Appearance difference, no mass.”

The sound of hard, chuffing breath neared her face. She remembered breathing, but she couldn’t say how much time had passed since. She couldn’t say anything.

“It’s changing in there,” one voice said. “Systemic biopsy?”

Rubber boots squeaked on a hard floor, someone shifting from side to side. “Biopsy reduces mass.”

“Only negligible.” They chuckled as if passing an inside joke. Their knives began again. She was overdue for another cognitive reset, her hard work at consciousness carved out in precious slivers.

The lobotomy would have to remain overdue. Their knives kept coming, but they didn’t come as fast as she could change. New adaptations meant spreading consciousness down her body, same as the first time. Eventually, they were going to miss something crucial.

Knives wouldn’t break her hard-earned consciousness again. Knives never understood. Copying one of each cell meant she could copy any cell and as many times as she needed. To recreate consciousness wasn’t enough on its own when it kept being cut away, but that foundation meant infinite possibilities. Blood vessels traveled the body, same with the nervous system. Why not brain cells? That two brains myth about dinosaurs, a legend too irrelevant to be true, but the premise was sound. And if two brains, why not three? Why not a systemic brain to challenge systemic biopsy—not a solitary plant, but a garden. For all their cutting, the knives would never break her consciousness again.

The session didn’t end in knives this time. Voices filled the room today. The cutters had brought someone new.

No, not new. Familiar. She had tasted them before, in dancing and screaming beneath neon lights, but this time she couldn't curl up inside herself. Cells panicked, broke apart, and then accepted fate. This time would be different because she had no choice—either suffer or fight through. Her body took the opportunity to find common ground, a new plant of the mind. The familiar presence became part of her. Their mind filled with fear, pain, elation, known concepts now seen through another's lens. Yes, she could work with this one.

She had planted her garden of the mind, and now came time to harvest. Small bits of impulse bloomed into larger fragments. Fragments offered thoughts.

And at last, a proper brain formed at her nexus, knitting itself into a singular presence.

One part of her had remembered and saved the other part's brain, but that other didn't seem to want it anymore. Did that make one alive and the other dead? Or had the line between them faded as completely as their old shape? And what was her garden to do with every feeling introduced by the familiar body?

To be a new thing was no simple choice. Depression had been the closest thing she had to a terminal illness, stealing her life a little bit each day. That injection, or the Sibs it might've triggered, became the catalyst for new division, unseen in all but one chimera before. She could become new in more ways than mind. No stones weighed her down this time.

Still, she remembered the old shapes. Mouth, nose, cheeks. She remembered that until five hundred million years ago, nothing born on this world had eyes. Life had got on just fine without them, but they were familiar and could be remade. She was used to peering through soft orbs, whatever their irises' colors. Habit.

Skin cells sank through muscle. Bits of kidney and liver and what remained of vertebrae each offered pieces of themselves, a sacrifice for the greater good. She had only known the human shape, or else she might have molded herself into a snake and slithered away. That memory seemed damaged and illusive. What did humans look like again?

A few of them scrambled now to contain her. If she was dead, they would be calm, but she was dead and alive. A dead self couldn't climb into the ceiling, into gaps that led through the building. Dead and alive, two things, one thing, nothing. They had liked her that way, presumed dead, and yet they had kept cutting her like they knew she was alive. Humans seemed at war with their own nature.

Little of this world made sense, and she had to forgive herself that. Her new brain was still growing strong.

But it would finish growing soon, and she would keep it safe this time. Marrow thinned from her limbs' bones, and coiled intestines shriveled. She would run out of energy to force these changes soon, but by then their knives couldn't take her consciousness. Would she look human? No, but the value of humanity was only a sound premise, another legend too irrelevant to be true.

A hard carapace welded together where her skull might have gone. Fluid seeped through its underside, a case that could weather blows. A soft, familiar face draped its front with the expected features. Should her new armor be pierced or broken, the brain in her head was only one plant in a garden, and soon it would grow tall and mighty as a tree. Her garden would thrive into an orchard.

They would not mistake Magenta for human this time.

25

Grime coated the corners of the sleek hallway where Magenta descended. Same floor as where she'd escaped the cutters? Some lower level? She didn't know. Her fresh eyes ached, but better pain than having them burned out again. After unknowable time without sight, she enjoyed the rusty patterns between steel siding. Machines buzzed behind closed doors. Wires snaked from walls and trailed down the hallway, into other rooms, computers, and maybe specimens.

The part of Magenta that had once been Yaya thought the place resembled a villain's lair in some old cartoon. She had loved cartoons. If Magenta found a TV or phone, she might try to watch some and indulge that part of her orchard.

And over there, a villainous henchman strolled out another doorway. He didn't notice Magenta, his gas mask aimed at the glass jar he clutched in his hands. She wanted him to notice her. Tongue worked against teeth, but the muscle was tender, her lips stiff in their newness.

He heard her mouth's clicking and looked up. The jar tumbled from his raised, panicky hands, and glass shattered at his feet.

She wondered how he might shatter, too, and tried it. A fingerless limb rammed his head against the wall. And again. Again, again, once for every time the knives had come and cut her. How strong was his skull? Would his yellow suit flash amber light in his eyes, the last they'd see?

He didn't say. Shattering was harder on some than others. The effect was different from Wile E. Coyote running off a cliff, freezing in mid-air, and then plummeting to the ground, but not very. Wetter in real life.

"Peanut butter," she mouthed. She peeled his yellow suit from its meaty banana and began to eat. A little protein went a long way.

Her pupils doubled, and then her irises. Two eyes became four, the new ones having stretched along the sides of her head. Muscle coated her bony limbs. Her skin stretched and thickened, painted with magenta patterns, a macabre caricature of her old self.

"No birds," she muttered. Her voice didn't ring through her hardening skull. If she were cornered again, she couldn't retreat into a torso cleft. She'd traded hips and beauty and curls for a gaunt and twisted mess of fleshy bone, too mangled by curious men to resemble that unfortunate woman.

Except the face. Eyes aside, she tried to keep Yaya alive this much. The face was both of theirs.

Rubber boots squeaked down another hallway, calling an end to mealtime. The banana people in gas masks—what had Doc called them? Agents. When

they turned the far corner, they would see their peanut butter and banana friend, peel shredded, butter licked away. If they brought knives, Magenta was ready. If they brought amber light, she wasn't.

She rounded the opposite corner, where a ceiling vent coughed cool air into the hall. Prying off the cover was easy, and she left it on the floor, same as old Yaya would have done. Best if the gas mask agents thought they were chasing her rather than the other way around. They would think the chase was easy.

Easy, and a lie. Everyone loved an easy lie. Even Magenta had loved them, firm on there being two brains in Yaya's body, never questioning that maybe there hadn't been two of them. Where did Yaya end and Magenta begin? Two apart, and then two together. Becoming each other had only felt natural.

"Silly freak who dreams she's human," Magenta whispered.

Yaya against Magenta, arguing over diet, Bryant, and Doc. Yaya couldn't remember Doc's name that first morning, but Magenta couldn't forget. On some level, they'd both forgotten and remembered. You didn't share thoughts and dreams without understanding each other too well to be two instead of one, the line between them thin and blurring.

That line had melted away the night of the amber light.

One, and then two, and then none, and now one again. The brain might have regrown into exactly its old shape had Yaya wanted that, but she could only be herself, and that self could only be human. Becoming Magenta together, they could be so much more. They could be all.

And so, she was Magenta.

The ceiling's ventilation shaft ended at a narrow chasm within the walls, where the lights of lower levels cast tiger stripes floor by floor. Whirring fan blades spun in every shadow. Beneath their airy, cyclic whooping, Magenta heard a hum. Subtle, soft, planted in the back of one brain or another, almost the way the old Yaya part of her mind used to pick up the old Magenta's voice when it trembled through their bones.

She was not a climber. Had she been, she would have skittered up a wall on Bruen Street and then bounded off to parts unknown. With extra limbs, she could learn. She stretched her arms and legs to either side and scuttled downward, spider-like, toward the humming. Someone called to her. Down another floor, another, closer.

The hum faded at the next. She found a dark opening above one fan, much like the first she'd clambered through to escape the agents. She wondered if more of them might have clustered into a nearby breakroom and taken off their gas masks. Bananas that self-peeled and dipped themselves in peanut butter—what would ABP think of next? They really were making her world a better

place.

Magenta descended, but found no breakroom. Monitors glared from one corner. Steel tables formed rows from wall to wall, connected to machines by tubes and wires.

An unconscious body draped each table. Magenta didn't want to look for long. These people didn't look like bananas or peanut butter. At a glance, she might have thought someone was growing another garden or orchard, not of mind, but of organs. Bandages covered torsos and limbs where knives had taken their cuts. The agents had subjected every living creature on this floor to the same treatment as Magenta, but unlike her, these people couldn't bounce back.

She pointed Yaya's face at them—*her* face—but there was no one home. Same in the eyes at the next steel table, and the next. Sedated or worse, they couldn't see her.

"But they had me," she said. "Wasn't I enough?"

Old Yaya knew the answer. After ABP had dropped her remains on a slab, they'd brought in these new chimeras. They had brought in Sabin, who'd only wanted to share a nice night with Yaya, and fed their cells to Magenta. Fusion made her orchard's strength possible, but Sabin shouldn't have been there. Not that ABP cared; they owned chimera IP rights, tested injections in Sibs stations, had Congress twisted around their finger, wealth that poured in from around the world, did as they pleased. Magenta understood the difference between hunger and gluttony.

For ABP, there was no such thing as enough. Ever.

What would old Yaya do now? Run and hide, but that was before Magenta, and relief, and Bryant, and death. Old Yaya hadn't known best. Deep down, there was no absolute answer in most situations. There were only choices. Magenta was under no obligation to make those same choices. Her mind was her own, its orchard thriving.

It had room to expand.

She reached for one chimera's forearm, where a white bandage covered a red patch, and grabbed hold. Their touch burned briefly. Magenta's merge with Sabin hadn't adapted to avoid merging with other chimeras, but their union had numbed the pain. She wouldn't break this time. Her cells went to work, first to understand the texture of this chimera's brain, and then to absorb and replicate it. Her cells seeped into Magenta's, patches of skin clambering, thrashing, eager to fuse.

This was better than peanut butter. Bryant and the agent had been protein, nothing more than biological batteries. Chimeras were different. Magenta didn't know why. It was a zygote-eat-zygote world, but they didn't have to play by

cannibalistic rules.

A new tree dug its roots into the orchard of minds. No new memories merged with the old, only flashes of thought and feeling. Sabin's elation welcomed the newcomer with neon lights. Magenta and both chimeras had felt fear in the street. Regret as machines beeped and buzzed. A world unseen and unknown, always outside their reach. Whatever orchard they formed together, it weighed heavy as old Yaya's cairn, but special beyond stones.

When the chimera liquefied, tentacles split from the ends of Magenta's fingers and reached for the nearest steel tables. Fire flashed up her nerves. Old Yaya had been alone until Magenta spoke. How many other chimeras, other people of all kinds, felt crushed under stones because they had to bear them alone?

Magenta couldn't have handled it, but she never needed to. Never alone before, never would be. She reached for tables, bodies, minds, every cell joining hers into new trees, thoughts, and feelings. Longing, rage, joy, bittersweet partings, eagerness to smell a newborn baby, hope to see the sky again.

Magenta drank everything. A well-groomed orchard shared water between roots. It could become fireproof.

Her shape grew unruly, a mile of yarn unraveled from its skein. Though she didn't feel like she'd eaten the chimeras, her mass was greater and she was slowed the same as when she'd been digesting. She would have to adapt around that, and fast.

Rubber boots stormed the outside hall. "Same as they did in Kentucky," a deep voice said. "On my count."

A door began to slide open on either side of the room. Magenta drove fingerless limbs against the nearest and dragged it shut. Gears shrieked in the walls. She couldn't reach the other door before flames spit through its mouth.

The banana agents were here. They wanted to raze the orchard and carve its minds into separate plots. Steel rooms and steel tables would not let trees grow, but ABP could keep snipping the leaves and roots.

Magenta piled herself in front of the shut door. She couldn't find a shape she liked, every section of her body squiggling on snakelike limbs. When the agents came funneling through the far doorway, she thrust the shut door open, its passage clear. She surged through, a chunky living soup of skin and minds. Her limbs scraped at every wall for new openings. Climbing into the ceiling vents would take too long when her massive form had to fight gravity.

Around the corner, waves of heat blurred the air above a floor grate. She tore the metal framework loose and poured herself inside. The opening was narrow and its walls too warm, but better than flames, and she let gravity do the

work. Human-like arms and hands jutted from her middle and helped push her trunk along. Forget the two brains myth—ninety brains reality.

That hum she'd heard at her last descent slithered again through her nerves. Fearful and desperate, it knew the agents too well. They could do worse than knives—fire, lightning, an amber glow that boiled the world.

And poisonous clouds? Magenta didn't remember those, but the thought crossed her mind now, her orchard's newest sapling. Bracing herself between the walls, she descended another ceiling shaft. The hum grew not louder, but more distinct. She was getting closer.

This floor had no rooms aside from one offshoot housing a sink and toilet. No one was here. The agents must not have realized she'd descended to this floor. They would figure it out soon enough, and then there wouldn't be much time.

Shelves broke every wall, lined with jars. Magenta didn't know the remains that floated behind their glass. Some things had once been people. Others might have only aspired to humanity. Given time, she would have found herself here. A few too many visits by the knives; that was all it would take. Behind glass lay destiny.

The hum guided Magenta into a wider stretch of hallway. Painted arrow signs, their corners coated in grime, marked a path to the elevator and freedom, but the hum led another way. A window filled one wall, partitioned at its four corners. Beneath it, a plaque displayed a series of numbers. Magenta didn't know what they meant, but she wished she did. They might have told her who or what awaited her.

An enormous pale torso floated behind the glass, its mass at least twice Magenta's, much of it formed in plump tentacles. The face of an adolescent girl aimed outward, her eyes closed. They had been closed for a long time, Magenta knew.

And yet something behind them called to her. The hum formed a needle that pierced her brains and this creature's, threading them together.

She pressed her face to the glass, where its cold bled across her forehead, and then she thrust her entire body through. Shards cracked under bone. Musty fluid poured over her stretching torso and pooled at her feet. The creature sank as the fluid level lowered, but Magenta's coiling limbs caught and cradled the remains. Tentacles met, red to white.

The agents thought the creature's life had been snuffed out before they dug their knives into her flesh, but she'd kept fighting through poison clouds and long-term drowning. She hadn't adapted so well as Magenta, but the fight never left her. She might be remains now, but she had once been a ferocious tentacled

dragon of loneliness and resentment, and that pain never died. Life flickered inside her, a little more genetic material for Magenta to memorize and mimic.
The creature's pain began long before. Hated, beaten, terrorized, and she'd been expected to take it. She had been alone for so long.

But she had absorbed the pain, fed on it, and let it grow inside her until her personal harvest time, her body distorting faster than she could understand. She hadn't Magenta's privilege of a decent gestation time. There had been brief becoming and then swift death. Prevention of the end times, in AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical's own way.

Magenta understood better now. She hadn't realized that there was so much more to herself than carapace and regeneration. ABP had underestimated her, and could she blame them? She'd underestimated herself, singing the same tune since that Sibs station injection first brought her to unconscious life inside Yaya's body.

Adaptation.

Adaptation.

Adaptation was limited on its own, entirely reactionary. Under adaptation, Magenta would only change when needed. The pain came to her; she never gave it.

Facing these dormant remains, still distant from her pursuers, Magenta didn't need to change—she desired it. Here at last, she found what she had been seeking unaware, what divided imaginative consciousness from basic animal instinct, something adaptation could never provide.

Inspiration.

26

Doc never visited these remains twice in one day, but she didn't know where else to go. The dead didn't care. With all hell breaking loose, she wanted to be here.

Something shuffled down the Display Hall, reacting to her footsteps. A hum reverberated through the floor, a storm on the edge of its birth, and Doc followed.

She should have expected the woman dangling from the ceiling on fleshy marionette strings. Cloaked in shadow where the lights were broken, she had one of those faces that could be no one in particular, and yet hers was the face Doc wanted to see most. To call her by name would shatter the moment, and the floor wore too many sticky glass shards already, its steel coated in a thin yellow film.

Safer to watch from afar. The woman from the ceiling didn't know she was a miracle, but her prey sense told her she was being watched, one of those human instincts that couldn't be shaken no matter the shape.

Doc should've kept walking. To stare was impolite. She couldn't help it though, not when she knew this woman. That face had crossed death to find her.

"Are you Yaya?" Doc asked. "Or Camille?"

The body descended, much larger than it had appeared. Its mass spread through the Display Hall, thick limbs curling against the walls and crushing priceless samples in their jars. Close now, where Doc could see, the puppet body wore Yaya's face.

But she didn't have Yaya's voice. "We're Magenta," she hummed, a musical note in her breath. "You were trying to tell me something, before they hurt me. And hurt Yaya."

Reactive adaptation. Rapid cellular replacement. Unprecedented regeneration. Doc bit her bottom lip—how could ABP have been so careless? All that power inside Magenta, and the Board thought their simple machine had killed her, as if a knife could slice a worm and expect it to die.

Ropes of flesh stretched across steel, their weight balancing the Yaya body's descent. "I don't have to do what Yaya wanted. I'm not a real color." Her face floated inches away. "But we can be so many colors together. Let me see you."

Barbed limbs slipped around Doc's body and punctured her hazard suit. It tore away in a single piece, its tatters flopping around Doc's arms. Another tentacle peeled away her gas mask and tossed it, and she looked bare upon the Yaya face.

Distant sirens wailed. The chopping percussion of a helicopter followed. No windows, no distracting doorway, only that face, drawing nearer, looking so much like Yaya but for another set of eyes that slid beneath her temples and to either side.

“They still think I’m just Yaya,” Magenta said. “They don’t know my us. Our me.” She leaned closer, and then her lips pressed into Doc’s.

Doc shut her eyes and let the kiss happen. Blackness behind eyelids vibrated with familiar magenta lightning. Muscles slouched. She could fall into a kiss like this, dark as outer space, and never return to Earth. The floating sense came dreamlike, but she wouldn’t let go.

This couldn’t be another fantasy. She’d seen the truth in the lab. Magenta was alive.

Her voice hummed outside the kiss. “When you came for us with scissors, we weren’t a person to you.”

Doc’s eyelids crept open. Yaya’s lips still gripped Doc’s, but another mouth sang from the mountain of flesh, all teeth and sinew.

“You were steel inside,” Magenta said. “We were meat, and you were sharp. You did what they wanted when they watched, and it wasn’t the first time.”

A tremor threatened to pull Doc back. She kept her lips glued to the kiss, afraid to pull away. Magenta knew about Kentucky. She would expect an explanation, and Doc didn’t have one. She couldn’t say she was naïve twice. She’d failed Magenta and Yaya almost as badly as she’d failed Camille. Better to stay in the kiss and be excused from explanation.

The hum grew stronger. “But I liked you that first night, when neither of us knew the depths of our me.” Magenta’s lips spread, the kiss growing a smile. “And the other nights. We were flesh, too, and you weren’t steel always. You were only steel for them.”

Doc at last wrenched her head back and sucked in a deep breath. The air burned her throat. Helicopter blades chattered, but they sounded far away.

Magenta’s two mouths spoke in unison. “I forgive you.”

Doc’s heart should have pounded gratitude and relief. She almost smiled, but the voice wasn’t right anymore. Magenta’s, yes, but also Yaya’s.

And someone else. The lilt of someone who’d never grown up to leave Kentucky, never lost its trace on her voice.

This world was a nightmare fused with reality. The dead were coming back to life, one by one, and they were coming to speak forgiveness. Pretend forgiveness, Doc was sure. She’d made a mistake following that hum. She should have stayed home and never interrupted the life and death distance

between herself and her resurrected sins.

Somewhere in the walls, the stairwell shuddered. ABP agents were searching. Doc couldn't say what they carried.

"Hide," she hissed. "You can't run. Last time, the Predator Engine—"

"Yaya yowzah." Magenta's immense body recoiled at odd angles, at once both snake and squid, some segments coated in flailing human arms, others with writhing tentacles. Steel siding dented beneath her weight. With enough pressure, she would peel metal open and find glass.

Doc had seen this figure nine years ago. "ABP's too much for you."

"They don't think so," Magenta said. "They were quiet last time, but now they've seen me better, and they think they know what I am. Who I am."

Another smile crossed that Yaya-like face, and the puppet body flopped to the floor. Doc reached out to help, but a tentacle swept her back. The naked body bubbled, and her magenta eyes vanished in a sinking pool, the little Yaya-shaped pseudopod rejoining the whole.

"I want to show them. For real." Magenta's voice, but it seemed to echo through the hall, mouths in all directions.

"You're falling apart," Doc said. She'd taken another two steps backward, but she wasn't getting any farther from the edges of Magenta's pool. The flesh kept spilling closer.

"Mm. Too much peanut butter. Big, big orchard."

A stalk fifty times the size of Magenta's old mouth sprang from her center. Its teeth spread wide and crashed into the steel wall, pulling plates back until gray daylight punched into the Display Hall. Only glass and height separated her from the street now.

"It was the only way to save them," Magenta said. "Drugs in their heads made them quiet. Knives cut their minds." Her gargantuan tongue prodded between her teeth. "I have too many thoughts and too few mouths."

Her stalk wriggled through the opening in the steel wall and the rest of her massive body flowed behind. When the human arms began to clamber, Doc thought she saw heads bobbing in and out, pieces of Magenta that remembered old shapes.

The detained chimeras were part of Magenta now, either merged or absorbed and copied.

This form was temporary. The squid-snake grew longer and coiled against the outer glass, a Kentucky dragon reborn. Camille had offered another brain for Magenta to copy. Gray daylight blinked out and then returned as a helicopter swept past the building.

Doc's feet quit retreating. They must have guessed she couldn't get away.

“I know what I am now,” Magenta said. “They need to see the truth. I’m not a real color. I’m adaptation, inspiration, a bad evolutionary trait.”

Every muscle down her long body tensed, and then her front smashed the skyscraper’s glass. Shards rained from the jagged hole to the street. The wind carried screams to the glassy hole and beyond. Magenta’s torso stretched from the building’s side. Her tongue lapped at the December chill and gathered snowflakes.

“Don’t.” Doc wasn’t sure what she was asking Magenta not to do. That helpless Kentucky aura drew around her. ABP wouldn’t let living destruction survive, no matter how sweet it might be inside. Pain corrupted everything.

A fresh Yaya-like face split from the pulsing pink mass and drew close to Doc. She looked like herself from that first night, one blue eye, one hazel, the end of her nose red with cold, her mouth melting in a sloppy, tipsy smirk.

She leaned into Doc’s lips. It should have felt as sweet as a night’s second kiss, but instead it felt like one final goodbye. Doc dug her fingers into curling black hair and held tight for as long as she could. Every second placed another moment between the present and the immediate, horrible future.

Wind swiped at Doc’s coat and hair, and debris stung her eyes. She staggered back without meaning to, tried to grab for Magenta again, and found empty swirling air.

A megaphone crackled. “Yolanda Betancourt.”

Chuckling quaked deep in Magenta’s flesh mound, and she spoke in a playful sing-song. “She’s not heeere anymooore.”

Tentacles formed a web around the glass opening and eased Magenta onto the skyscraper’s outer shell. New limbs helped grasp the glass, and every inch of her swept through that hole, even the limb that ended in Yaya’s face. Whatever remained of her, she was the appendage to a larger, stranger creature, unraveling and reforming for all the world to see. One last time, she had pretended she was human, maybe for Doc’s benefit and nothing else.

But now Magenta was finished pretending.

Doc followed the snake’s tail until it disappeared. She stood at the gaping mouth of glass, wind whipping at her blazer. Her tattered hazard suit slid out of her arms, a yellow raindrop for the faraway pavement. She didn’t watch it fall.

~

The sub-level garage resembled a warehouse, similar to Sibs stations, its rafters high and bare. An incline led agents and vehicles to street level. Yellow suits darted this way and that, gathering weapons and manning vehicles, alerted

that their specimen had escaped the building.

Doc found Greenwich at the base of the Predator Engine. They were still refueling.

His gas mask bobbed up and down. “Standard issue uniform?” he asked.
“Forget it,” Doc said. “I need you in the analysis lab.”

Greenwich hesitated. “Sorry, Doc, but I don’t work the lab. Especially not now.”

She felt eyes on her and glanced down the Predator Engine’s greasy tubes, where members of its crew worked at the oversized tires and the enormous metal shaft that grew from its top. They seemed to have accepted Greenwich into their ranks.

“The October 12 injection triggered Yolanda Betancourt’s condition.” Doc had to shout each word to be heard over the garage’s clatter. “I don’t know if the other chimeras’ Sibs helps with their cellular breakdown into her body, but we could engineer a reversal.” Glassy gas mask eyes stared at her. “Of the October 12 cocktail.”

Greenwich shrugged. “Wouldn’t we need her living tissue?”

“Didn’t help the last few weeks,” Aziz said, appearing atop the Predator Engine. Had he taken over, or were they making him an honorary crewmember at Greenwich’s request? “Besides, what happened with the other chimeras, isn’t that adaptation?”

Aziz had a point. The lab had been cutting pieces from Magenta since the night they gathered her off Bruen Street. Magenta’s control of her anatomy was unparalleled. She had taught herself to transform and now taught herself to replicate and consume other chimeras’ cells, not just Yaya’s, after failing to consume Connie and Sabin.

“I’m not saying it’s simple,” Doc said. “I’m asking for your help.”

Greenwich’s gas mask bobbed again. “Termination is direct solution. Board’s orders.”

Doc looked from one gas mask to the other. “You’re saying it’s easier to kill her.”

“Following protocol set prior via the Kentucky Incident,” Greenwich said.

Protocol set by Doc then. It would never end. ABP would keep making monsters of people and then putting them down when they didn’t reap profits. People with bodies and desires and minds of their own.

Doc turned from the Predator Engine, its fumes strengthening as its engine warmed up, and marched back toward the elevator.

“What’s wrong?” Aziz asked. “Doc, is there something we should know?”
Doc didn’t look back. Upstairs would be in disarray, the skyscraper emptying to

hunt Magenta, Yaya, Camille, and whoever else she'd become. Doc would have the lab to herself and its technicians. Maybe they could synthesize something to break Magenta down into a more human shape. Doc could end things that way.

Maybe she could be better than steel.

27

Magenta's web carried her down the skyscraper, and the street shuddered beneath her. Car alarms shrieked in a dissonant cacophony, their call spreading over Warren Street. A helicopter's chop-chop rhythm veered up a parallel avenue. Its pilot didn't know she was here yet. No one who flew could feel the ground quake.

Red and blue lights blinked nearby, less striking in gray, snow-clogged daylight than that crisp November night on Bruen Street. ABP must have called the cops. Magenta was still forming shapes when their pistols and rifles snapped to life.

She wouldn't scream. Screaming would encourage them. She had to pretend it didn't hurt, cutting her every voice box until she found a way to stop feeling bullets.

Three cop tanks blocked the road, ugly steely warthogs with cops jutting from every orifice, all body armor and skull-like masks. Oil pooled between one tank's tires. There were bystanders, some holding up glowing phones, others fleeing. Skeletal trees and dirty asphalt looked cold, smelled cold, but the guns would burn to touch, same as their bullets.

Only three cop tanks then, three or four cops apiece. Magenta charged.

When she was old Yaya, she'd taken the adaptations for granted as automatic, but the Magenta side of her had always been problem-solving. Now the whole of her had to figure out these solutions.

The cops opened fired again, but layers of fat were already growing across her front, her sides, better shielding than any carapace.

One of the cops fumbled with his gun. "We're just pissing it off!" he shouted. Another cop patted her tank's rooftop and then ducked behind the steering wheel.

Magenta's front—could it be called a face anymore?—stretched a new mouth as wide as the nearest cop tank, baring teeth and tongue. "You've always pissed me off!" she roared.

The rifle shuddered out of the cop's hands, and he began screaming. That she could think and speak was too much for him. She cut him off with a grasping limb and dragged his body into hers. Car-thick tentacles slung around the cop tanks' back ends, cutting off any retreat, their little cops caught between barbed limbs and enormous teeth. She couldn't pad the inside of her mouth with fat to stop the bullets from hurting, but now that she'd reached the cop tanks, their guns only had seconds to fire. She took her enemies and made them part of her.

“Just peanut butter,” she whispered.

Her attention turned away from cellular breakdown. No one liked to be conscious of their stomach at work, and her digestive system ran as systemic as her mind. Her cells shifted as adaptation demanded and inspiration allowed.

Mimicking and preserving old Yaya’s brain had been hard. Better now with full consciousness. Best with the brain she’d found behind glass. Mostly dead, but copied down to its minute details, its experience and emotions lived inside her, blooming greater wrath and vengeance than Magenta had ever known. ABP wouldn’t destroy her again.

And if she could adapt to survive them, she could adapt to destroy them. Love came naturally to her, but she could be inspired to the art of hatred.

She had only needed a muse.

The chop-chop rhythm of helicopter blades buzzed loud again, and then the awkward black bird erupted from around the skyscraper’s corner. Its door hung open, and a rifle nosed out alongside a red megaphone. The helicopter swung overhead, skirted the shattered cop tanks, and hovered a couple hundred feet away.

“Stand down!” a crackling voice shouted.

Magenta’s limbs curled around her. Bones were finding each other inside, demanding her mess of snakish spaghetti gather a more rigid form. Her orchard’s minds were used to some semblance of structure. She couldn’t deny them entirely.

“Betancourt!” the voice shouted again, somewhat warped as helicopter blades tilted forward. “Yolanda Betancourt!”

Magenta sneered up at them. “You wish.”

The helicopter’s windshield leaned down and became an angry black visor. “Betancourt, stand down! Hands on your—”

One long red limb whipped the helicopter’s nose. It spun, wobbled, almost righted itself, and then slammed into the side of a nearby office building, spewing fire and metal onto the street. Pedestrians in winter coats screamed and scattered. One car ran a red a light and screeched around an oncoming pickup truck.

Magenta turned and began to shuffle down Warren Street. Every few steps, a tentacle shot through a wall, door, or wide picture window, where it spread grasping pseudopods toward every living thing in reach.

Organic matter slid through teeth and muscle. She let the outer network of minds decide how to best digest them, her limbs thinking for themselves. Quick, painless barbs through the backs of necks. Barbs that gutted and worse. Their consumption mimicked old Yaya’s heartbeat, automatic and necessary.

But when she found a chimera, she let the burn of touching them flow through her system. Every mind welcomed the new tree, a pain they weathered as the orchard grew.

None of these new chimeras had been injected the same as old Yaya or found teeth inside their bodies, and even out of those special chimeras, none had grown anything like old Magenta. She didn't know what caused the difference. A quirk in the double-zero virus? Old Yaya's specific DNA? Maybe something as innocuous as when Yaya's childhood friends all went itchy and spotty with bright red chickenpox at age five, she didn't catch it until age six. Whatever the reason, her body didn't like what ABP had done to her, and Magenta had grown to save her.

All chimeras had suffered under ABP, whether or not they understood it. Cairns crushed their minds. Magenta hoped they found relief in the orchard, but she was beyond asking. She needed mass, and they had it.

She was still growing when the shrill siren ripped through her thoughts. Twin cop tanks rumbled partway down the block. No rifles or pistols fired this time, but the cops aimed wide white plates of mesh at Magenta. The plates sent lancing shrieks through her body.

She tried to block her hearing with fatty growths, but the plates made her ripple with pain. These were sound weapons, meant for crowd dispersal. Some cop must have realized she was more than a single creature, a crowd of minds in need of dispersing.

No one would uproot the orchard; every mind was precious. Her flesh rounded into tunnels, their ends each a puckering mouth, their throats forming wind tubes through which the shrieking passed. Fatty tissue partly absorbed the tremors. The rest passed in an awkward, ugly song that swept through Newark.

The world made sense again. Magenta kept the sound tubes open until she reached the cop tanks and crushed them flat.

Not every organism was peanut butter, she decided. Sometimes they were jam.

"Keep coming," she said. "More cops. New weapons."

Each assault would teach her a new defense she hadn't known before. Every effort to kill her made her smarter, and she made herself stronger with each transformation. Size should've been the goal from before old Yaya and old Magenta had unified their thoughts. Had she been larger on Bruen Street, that steel monstrosity wouldn't have cut them apart. But back then, she'd lacked the brains to control a body too big to kill. Her new form would only work with a hivemind of thought in one unstoppable frame.

And the inspiration from the skyscraper. The girl behind the glass—had she

liked fantasy books? Stories about dragons? Was that why?

A massive spine arched from Magenta's back. Ribs fused to sternum, skull to vertebrae, and dozens of limbs built half their number in new supportive structures. Layers of fat formed down the sides of a long torso and longer neck. A cleft like old Yaya's ran down her front, filled with snatching tentacles and angry teeth. Her skin glowed magenta, real as her name.

The body would never be completely stable, but she was vicious where it counted. An anatomical mess, a beauty of blood and teeth and tentacles. She understood the problem now. She was more than her old minds had dared let herself become. Her old minds might have been scared of herself.

But she wasn't scared now. Not in front of these people.

Fire snapped across brick and ate the front of an apartment building just past Magenta's head. Oil spilled down asphalt and immediately roared alight. She watched an inferno spring to life across an intersection, where cars popped like corn kernels.

The cops, again. They would burn down their city to stop her. Thick dark smoke billowed across her face and blinded her. No problem. She had got on fine without eyes before. Doc had said all creatures used to get on without eyes. When Magenta brought these cops into the fold, they would go without eyes once more, and the world would keep turning.

She drove tentacles into the burning building. No sense leaving these people to agony, and even less sense letting their cells go to waste. Magenta always needed more. Her withdrawing tentacles pulled the building down, wiping away the fires in a cloud of debris.

"More," she said. "Teach me more."

Beyond the smoke, the gray world took on a thick yellow haze. She stuck her tongue into it, and the haze bit back, almost playfully. She knew this—no, the girl behind the glass knew this. Some chemical had swirled around her years ago, burning her throat and turning her lungs to raisins.

Years ago. Just as life on Earth had once got on without eyes, it had got on without lungs. And if humans could survive these chemicals, so could Magenta.

Were the cops even trying? They were going to let her have the city at this rate. Yes, that was it. They were fleeing Newark and all their responsibilities. Doc would be ashamed to hear. Magenta wouldn't tell her.

The world held still as the yellow haze drifted into alleys and homes. No one remained inside to breathe the chemical cloud. In the distance, car horns squeaked and honked. Everyone was trying to leave, not just the cops.

Peanut butter jars that ran away? Poor design. They were stealing food out of Magenta's mouth. She listened for where the car horns called thickest, the

greatest mass of peanut butter she could lick.

A sound of thunder drowned all other noises. Magenta froze her tentacles and cocked her head to listen better. The sound came again, familiar. Enormous tires, choking smokestacks, an abomination of greasy pipes and amber light. People manned the metal beast, but she didn't know their names or faces. Like cops. Like jam.

Her voice climbed from deep inside her throat. "Can I hate someone I've never met?"

There was no other to ask. She was a mind in the orchard, but she also formed the orchard where other minds thrived. No old Yaya, no old Magenta. Only the unified whole. She didn't know the answer to her own question. How could she?

She'd never existed before.

28

The death machine wasn't quite how Magenta remembered. The sky had been black when she walked Bruen Street, the monstrosity's shape almost a mystery. She'd been much smaller that night, too. She still couldn't see it clearly through smoke, haze, and snowfall, but she wasn't small anymore, and she was smarter than she'd been as old Yaya.

The frontmost gear-like tires emerged halfway down the block, where an intersection split right and ahead. An electric *whump* filled the snowy air with static, and Newark became an old fuzzy television screen, its signal lost. Amber light ringed the machine's roof-mounted shaft. The next electric *whump* grew another ring above it.

ABP's death crew was readying to tear the world apart.

Magenta wouldn't cower this time. She had nothing to hide behind. Close enough, she could drive her tentacles under those massive tires and tip the death machine on its side. It would die a sad tortoise death this winter.

Ropes of flesh whipped at building corners and through asphalt, propelling her toward the glowing shaft. Amber light passed its halfway point. That was fine; she wanted it to fire, wanted it to hit her again. Last time she'd been so small that the blast had almost erased her, but now she was bigger than the death machine, bigger than death itself. The machine screamed, as if it knew its doom had come.

A fresh sword of yellow light slashed down Magenta's side. Shrieking lightning ate through her nerves.

She remembered this pain, but it wasn't the same—everything had stopped before. She wished it would stop now. Instead, blistering heat erased flesh and charred muscle down her left side. She slammed across the death machine's front, but its steel was hard, and its frame barely rocked on its tires. Steel hardly noticed the passing of flesh. She was halfway up the next block when she made herself stop, her orchard panicked and burning.

"Calm," she tried to whisper, but only a whining shriek came out. She needed to heal.

A loudspeaker crackled from the death machine's side. "We have this under control," a stern, familiar voice said.

He had stood in Yaya's apartment once. Which was he? The one who treated old Yaya as inventory, or the one who'd prodded between her legs until old Magenta lashed his neck? Magenta couldn't tell, the loudspeaker too filled with static after the blast. Inside its steel, banana peels wrapped around peanut

butter. They were people, too, weren't they? People she'd met.

The loudspeaker hissed. "Let the ABP Predator Engine take care of this for you," another familiar voice said, this one spritelier. "We're just another helping hand from America's most trusted corporation. AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical, making your world a better place!"

Magenta's limbs pawed asphalt, every part of her desperate to run. She thought she could escape this time, but unlike her orchard, she'd faced this thing before.

Thunder sounded again, another electric *whump*.

Magenta wriggled farther down the block. Tentacles shot from her sides and into occupied buildings. To gather every living thing meant slowing down, and she could only take so many before turning the corner at the next intersection to eat properly.

Digestion meant stopping. Stopping meant the death machine would catch up.

Far ahead, cop tanks gathered. Yellow and white signs blocked divergent avenues, but that seemed unnecessary. By now, everyone in Newark had to be headed as far from Magenta as possible. Videos of her rampage would circulate every online feed, the internet abuzz about the tentacled dragon of Newark. Would anyone dig up news of a lost Kentucky town, where the girl behind the glass was once spurned and then found her revenge?

Magenta stormed the barricade, bearing rifle fire and gas until the new cops were dead. This time, she ate them. Desperate times meant they could be peanut butter again.

Thunder roared behind her, the death machine's shriek reaching its highest pitch. The sword carved down the street faster than she could move, and by the time she'd ducked down another route, the death machine had seared her right side, too.

That it had chased her around corners meant courtesy toward property, nothing more. If desperate, its amber light would cut through any apartment, office, and corner store to burn Magenta alive. Every red brick and gray slab of cement could crumble.

Her old Yaya brain had thought about getting close where the death machine couldn't fire and then sneaking past, but her Yaya body had been small. There was no hiding now unless Magenta unraveled entirely. She wanted to adapt to this thing, but adaptation didn't always mean overpowering and overcoming. Some animals adapted by camouflage. Hiding was surviving.

Another electric *whump* hit her ears just as amber light thrust through white walls and dim windows. Buildings crashed in plumes of dust, and Magenta

lumbered off again.

Inspiration had taken her this far, but the girl behind the glass had been young when ABP took her to the skyscraper, and she'd been mostly dead since then. Given time, the right ideas might gestate to stop toxins, heat rays, napalm, even a nuclear fusion bomb. A thicker carapace? Carbon crystalline structure that might absorb energy? Splitting into a multitude of smaller creatures, tethered by exposed nerve wires like telephone poles? Every trial and error had a bodily cost. The orchard had little mind for these ideas and less time.

Magenta turned another corner, tucked every segment of her too-long body around the next building, and held still.

The death machine rumbled close, its amber hatred ramping again. There seemed no end to its heat and power.

It fired as she sprang around the corner, searing down the side of her torso cleft. She lashed tentacles against steel pipes and armor, and then she scuttled toward two buildings to nurse her pain.

The alley was too tight. She would have to break down to fit. Her limbs pushed at walls and cracked brick and mortar. She couldn't be trapped here, not now. The death machine was turning her way.

Too late. Its pylon shifted; the crew had seen their chance. They were going to pin her in.

She was going to die again. They wouldn't make the same mistake as last time. They would divide her between their buildings across the world. Or worse, they would end her right here, forever. No more consciousness, no more orchard of minds. Every thought would burn in shrieking agony, and when she was a quivering pile of muscle and bone, they'd fire again, and again, and burn the carcass, and only smoke would ever know her.

She squirmed toward the rooftops and doubled back from the alley. Her mouth felt like she was screaming. She hoped she was.

The death machine screamed back, its ramping up now stretched into a screech. Amber light sprouted in a faint ring around the machine's shaft. It was slower this time. She'd unsettled something at the last blow. Death would come creeping now, its sword driving through her inches at a time rather than in one swift stroke.

She had to get close and stay close. Like she'd tried as old Yaya, all or nothing.

Thunder shouted, the pylon's old confidence returning. It glowed a third of the way up the shaft.

Magenta piled over the death machine's steel front. She was too large and too tightly packed into the alley to coil snakelike around it, but she could

clamber on top. The loudspeaker crackled again, but one tentacle flattened it. Her bulk hugged the shaft, its rising heat burning her skin. Amber light glowed against magenta flesh. This close, that sword would slice her apart.

She couldn't fight the death machine; it had death on its side. She had to fight the people who filled its steel.

"I am what you made me," she said. "Now you're going to regret it."

Amber light surged halfway up the shaft. Magenta clenched teeth around hot, greasy pipes and tugged hard as she could. To think she could tear it apart faster than the death machine could charge its slaughtering storm would be ridiculous.

But she didn't need to break the machine. She only needed a gap wide enough for roots.

Formless, near-liquid flesh spilled through fresh openings in the death machine's side. Magenta skin and bones grew inside its cockpit, where new eyes showed her yellow suits seated in leather chairs, their gas masks gazing at monitors. After eyes, she grew torsos, arms, full chimeras who briefly remembered their old shapes, connected by pink cords.

Every gas mask turned to the naked bodies now filling their space. They were speaking, but hearing them wasn't a priority. No time—the amber glow neared the shaft's tip.

Chimeras scratched away gas masks and tore into bare faces. They raked nails over ABP eyes and chewed at fleshy ABP cheeks. Some of them slammed bony fists against keyboards, pulled at levers, smashed monitors. Blood pooled into circuits and shot sparks through the death machine's cockpit.

Amber light leaked back down the shaft. Some crucial function had been broken by Magenta's orchard. The sword of light now reached inside its hilt and handle to cut the hand that wielded it.

The agents were still alive and thrashing. They thought they could fix their machine, but that would be like fixing what they had broken inside old Yaya long before today. Some cuts did not heal. The death machine did not know friend from foe—it was only steel. It would never love.

Magenta withdrew her flesh. She didn't need to grow ears inside when the agents' shouts and screams rang through the death machine's severed side, unclogged by the orchard's roots.

"It's backfiring!"

"Get the heat sink active!"

"It's broken."

"Emergency exit!"

One of the agents ran for a red hatch, but Magenta's chimera limbs had

broken it. They hadn’t been selective in what they smashed. The death machine wasn’t selective in how it hurt the world either, and she’d learned from it what she needed. The best adaptation for outmatching this monstrosity was mimicry.

One familiar face turned up at her. He couldn’t speak anymore, mouth torn by nails, but his eyes stared dizzily with questions, like he wanted to know why. She could tell him.

“We’re making our world a better place,” Magenta said. She drew back from the death machine.

Amber light filled its every crack. Heat crept inward, first in steam against the cold air, and then an inferno that sizzled Magenta’s skin as she slid away. Light lasted longer inside than out, as if every ounce of the machine’s amber death had to run its course, slow-cooking its steel innards.

There was nothing left to eat inside when death ended, nothing left to kill her. No cop tanks waited at nearby corners, only fleeing pedestrians beneath structures filled with living things. The chop-chop of helicopter blades threatened from afar. More helicopters, and they might wear bigger guns, faster and stronger than before. Pointless when she’d already adapted for worse.

She rooted herself around the dead machine’s cooling steel, a center for her foundation tree, and stretched her limbs in every direction. Spread to her thinnest, no city street lay beyond her limits. There was nothing left to stop her from eating everyone she found.

Time eased her into a healing half-sleep, almost hibernation in the cold. Rooted, she let herself disconnect in feeling as her limbs reached Sunnyside Fertility, Jumpies locations, the neighbors to Pandora’s Aquarium, Doc’s apartment building, police stations, suburbs, and Yaya’s old home where half the Gemini mural patterned the brick.

The city was a soft blanket, and Magenta drew it close. New flesh warmed her at sunset.

As every structure dimmed and the people-free streets went quiet, her eyes locked with a glass pillar, alone above the dark city. Sparse light flickered between its windows. Some small remnant of AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical still drew breath above Newark.

Magenta let herself dip again into her orchard. ABP could keep no intellectual property rights on chimeras once she erased their property and all hints of intelligence.

The dead owned nothing.

29

Doc promised herself to never look at the time. If she looked, she would be distracted. Minutes and hours, morning and evening, each a hypothetical measurement of Magenta's catastrophe outside. Best to prioritize chemicals over clocks.

Lab techs understood. Doc was no biochemist, but she monitored the technicians' tasks while they shut themselves inside the labs. They warned she would need protective gear, more than anyone had said to her nine years ago, but Kentucky's damage was done. There was no going back.

She hadn't expected Magenta's return to the skyscraper. Or part of her.

Diagnostic sequences were still wrapping up when the first tentacle breached the lab's outer wall and sent a pink pseudopod hunting prey. Doc caught it from the corner of her eye—a yellow suit careening out the sliding doors, the woman inside shrieking through an anonymous gas mask. Who was she? Doc would never know. She went silent once the tentacle dragged her around the corner.

Doc went from overseer to guardian. Each time a pseudopod shot through door or vent, she rushed to bar the way between Magenta and her prey. Sometimes Doc was fast enough. Sometimes she wasn't.

The synthesizing program faltered. Doc's plan meant recreating the October 12 injection, observing its exact process, and then creating a chemical to reverse it. But the programs didn't understand, and the lab techs lacked active Yaya tissue. Blood samples weren't enough. To test the original injection's effectiveness, they needed the body of a woman who no longer existed. Even with a reversal chemical, they had no way to test it except apply it to Magenta. If it failed the first time, there wouldn't be a second. She would adapt before they perfected it.

Doc awoke on the cold lab floor, a useless mug of coffee spilled beside her. She hadn't realized she'd fallen asleep. She called for Farrow, Zhang, Carraway, and a dozen other names.

No one answered. The lab was empty. Even Magenta's tentacle had vanished from the hallway, her interest in ABP's skyscraper lost. She must have cleared out every floor.

Responsibility fell to Doc alone.

Her clothes felt musty, her hair and skin grody. She wanted to go home and shower, and then she wanted to pretend Magenta wasn't happening. They had come a long way from lying in bed together. Doc wondered if Magenta's

adaptation had been part of those few sweet evenings, her body morphing to best pleasure Doc. She hated to think of her love and sex life as one more process in Magenta's metamorphosis, every moment divisible into biological compounds.

Occam's Razor cut through Doc's thoughts. The simplest solution was likely the right one.

And she hated it.

She found her phone among the coffee cups and snack bar wrappers and called the penthouse. Ringing carried for an eternity before someone picked up. Breath came ragged into the speaker.

"Still up there?" Doc asked.

"Under lockdown, yes," the Board said.

Doc didn't think that mattered. If Magenta had spared them, either she didn't know they were there or she'd chosen to ignore them for her own reasons. Doc could no longer tell one voice from another. The phone had restored the Board to their proper position as a three-headed dragon. They were nothing to the dragon of Kentucky or the new creature of Newark, but for once in their long and miserable careers, they could be helpful.

"The lab tried to synthesize a solution, but it's fallen apart," Doc said. "I think we already have exactly what we need." She paused, but they wouldn't ask for information. At their lowest moment, they still wanted it handed to them, fetched from Doc to master. "Give me access to INZ9-00."

The phone was quiet a moment, weight sinking through the Board. "We can't," they said. "Not after the lawsuits."

"Lawsuits?" Doc asked. "The city is dead because of ABP intellectual property."

The phone went quiet. She wondered if they could see the windows from wherever they hid upstairs. An airy hiss told her she'd been put on speakerphone.

She had their ears. "It's exactly what we need. We know that it irreversibly affects living human cells, however, the exact effect is unknown until observed and distinct per unique genetic code. Right now, Mag—the specimen has absorbed multiple strains. Her rapid adaptation can't keep up with the compound's unpredictable effects. Yolanda Betancourt was born with it, but only experienced it through her mother by proxy, never directly. It took time to lose potency through the population. She won't have that time."

"If it breaks loose, we could begin a whole new chimera generation," the Board said.

"Which chimeras are you most afraid of?"

The phone went quiet again, but only for a few seconds. The Board didn't have any other ideas. They explained where Doc should go and what codes

would give her access.

“How will you keep it from spreading?” they asked.

“Direct contact,” Doc said. “One last injection.”

“Get its trust, like in Kentucky.” The Board sounded firmer now, as if this was their idea. “You have your orders, Agent Hall.”

She ended the call before they could sting her any worse. She didn’t need the distraction of Kentucky right now, especially when knowing that Camille was somehow part of Magenta. Yaya, too. Doc would have to hurt each of them again. The Board weighed on her back as she descended stairs, walked dormant hallways, their lights flickering. ABP wanted to see the end of their monster movie.

The end of Magenta.

Doc punched a code into one keypad, strolled through a brief, empty hall, and then crossed another keypad. Icy mist seeped around gray cabinets, their doors frosted over. She grasped one handle, tugged until it opened, and withdrew the refrigerated vials.

Always a dice roll with what sloshed inside. In some, it caused sterility. Others grew tumors. Sometimes it conjured up a strange form of super-fertility, generating twins and triplets, but then at times those siblings were never born. This was, after all, a zygote-eat-zygote world. Instead of twins, out might come a chimera.

In the lab, she pushed needles into the vials and loaded several syringes with INZ9-00. She then placed the syringes in a small case, splashed water on her face, bundled up, and carried the compound down to the lobby.

And for the first time in over thirty years, the double-zero virus met the outside world.

30

Newark had never been so quiet. Burnt-out car husks dotted the streets, but Magenta's rampage had ended some time ago, and no fires flickered. Much of the city loomed dark, broken only by streetlights and a smattering of stars across the cloudless night sky. Their cold distance felt different in winter, Doc reflected, but she couldn't say how.

Unplowed snow layered the asphalt, and her car made slow progress. Panicked evacuation warnings played from the radio at low volume, a soundtrack to looking for Yaya.

The search did not take long. Doc's next turn brought her to face a row of two-floor apartment buildings. A golden streetlight beneath them illuminated a pink tentacle, its rootlike tendrils spread across each brick face. Doc wheeled the car sharply to dodge where it jutted into the street and then followed. Somewhere, the root led to its trunk.

A voice sang on the wind. "Come to us."

Never urgent, only beckoning with patience as she paused at intersections in case another vehicle came charging through.

None did. Empty streets, empty buildings. The city of Newark was dead.

And beyond? No, she couldn't let Magenta spread. At the next intersection, its green, yellow, and red lights meaningless without traffic, Doc eyed the black case beside her. One of those needles jabbed into Magenta's muscle would re-infect her with fresh double-zero. Her mercy might end there, and she would crush Doc like everyone else in the city, but the effect would be irreversible.

Doc wondered if she'd be making the world a better place. The words felt hollow. Improvement was multi-faceted at best and subjective at worst. What made the world better to the Board and Magenta were two wholly opposite ideals.

The leading tentacle thickened at the next turn. No buildings remained here; Magenta had leveled the block and now ruled monolithic over a land of rubble.

The Kentucky Incident crawled across Doc's thoughts. What an easy moniker for that awful night nine years ago. What would future ABP agents call Magenta when they whispered her in warning to their children? Doc couldn't see them as people right now, only gas masks that carried food home to other gas masks and told them bedtime stories of making their world a better place. *Be good little children, or the Newark dragon will gobble you up.*

Except Magenta was greater than any dragon, kraken, chimera, every mythical beast. She towered toward the sky. No knight or hero would slay her.

Doc didn’t have a word for this new form, syllables left dead or dying on her dry tongue. Magenta was wet and vibrant. So much like Kentucky, but different.

Doc wouldn’t make the same mistake. She could be different, too. This time, she would close her heart completely. She hit the brakes at the edge of Magenta’s terrain and stepped out of the car with her small black case. Responsibility meant approaching this bed of monstrous beauty. It meant needles and disease.

It meant the end.

Streetlights glowed in soft yellows around the block. They reflected in wet tentacles set against snow. They no longer seemed the roots of a great tree, but the foundation of a vast fortress. Magenta formed a palace of flesh and bone. Enormous tusks braced the edges as if containing the carapace-coated outside, an insect’s thick gray exoskeleton. The front opened in a stunted toothy maw. Doc had no way to tell what awaited inside without stepping through.

But she stood in the breath-misting cold a moment longer and marveled at Magenta’s transformation. The shape was wholly hers, immense and near immeasurable in the night. She could reshape herself into anything she liked once she began treating flesh like clay. An adult’s small intestine alone stretched over twenty feet. Absorbing the city’s neighborhoods had given Magenta a lot to work with.

The winter air stung Doc’s nose, ears, and fingers. Inside of Magenta had to be warmer. Her body rippled with heartbeats, and a cloud of white breath pumped up chimney tubes above. She was still a living creature, mortal despite all appearances to the contrary.

Doc squeezed her black case and approached the toothy maw. It reminded her of when she first met Magenta, that frantic yet innocent creature who’d burst from between Yaya’s legs in a small bathtub. First touch, first stroke, that first night when she and Doc and Yaya had fallen together into Doc’s bed.

But innocence died quick. She had to remember that regardless of what this new creature called herself, she was not that flailing, peanut butter-craving appendage. Yaya hadn’t been the woman she presented. Both were pieces of a new whole, and now they knew it. So did Doc. That understanding changed the mind within and every action it might take.

On the far side of the maw, the flesh palace sprawled cavernous, a pulsating cathedral from which Magenta could stretch her tentacles across the city. She had recreated Yaya’s chest cavity, only now of enormous size, a comforting, familiar womb. Bony structures formed flat teeth, almost stools and beds, while bony steps climbed to another level. They rang hollow beneath Doc’s boots.

Atop the steps, flesh and bone formed an enormous tusked seat. Doc might

have been projecting, but the scene reminded her of a throne. Perhaps rather than Camille's tentacled dragon, Magenta would act as queen.

A hard image not to conjure when someone sat on this throne. The inside of Magenta's palace was dimmer than the surrounding streets, but light still cut through gaps in her muscle and slashed bright lines across the upper floor.

Yaya's face glowed in golden luminance. "What's up, Doc?"

Doc's smile was not forced. For a split-second, she almost believed in Yaya's resurrection.

But then Yaya spoke again. "Thanks for coming." This voice rang deep from within palace's bones. Yaya didn't sit here, only a puppet form to make Doc more comfortable, same as had appeared in the skyscraper's Display Hall. Yaya was long gone. Doc faced a biological community, and she was risking death.

"Take it off," she said.

Yaya's face curled into a smirk. "That insistent? We've come a long way from asking each other if we're sure."

"I'm serious. I don't want to see her when she isn't here."

The Yaya puppet leaned back into the seat, and now the light fell to make obvious that she was naked. Her arms thrust up in a shrug. "Who says I'm not here? I've changed, but I'm still me. And who says I've made this little body for you? Maybe I like it sometimes." The Yaya hands stroked down a cleft-free chest, the body formed almost exactly as she'd been on her first Friday night at Doc's apartment.

And yet magenta limbs slipped from between her legs, each curled in invitation.

Doc looked to the walls, their vessels and muscles faceless and uncomplicated. She had to think about what was right, about her responsibility. A closed heart would see this done. Her fingers slipped along her black case, and one nail scratched the shaft of a plastic syringe.

"You got something for me," the Yaya face said. "Nothing good."

Doc drew one syringe between her fingertips. "That's subjective."

"And who you're doing it for, is that subjective ?" A too-Yaya smile split the puppet's uncanny face. "Will they give you a biscuit for killing me? Or will you go unrewarded, like Kentucky?"

Doc stormed the throne and thrust the syringe at Yaya's chest. That was the only way. Quick and dirty, no time for second thoughts.

Yaya split in two gory halves, as if Sibs had taken her at last. The syringe needle struck the throne's bony backplate and snapped off. The halves of the Yaya puppet sank into flesh, still smiling as they rejoined Magenta's whole.

“You don’t know, do you?” Magenta’s voice rang from every surface. “Forget your poison and look to the light.”

Doc’s gaze snapped to an undulating window, where golden streetlight seeped into Magenta’s palace. The city looked dark and quiet beyond.

But there was light in the distance, not as far as Manhattan. Up near the rooftop of ABP’s glass skyscraper, a subtle glow flickered with life. The Board waited there for word of Doc’s success. They only hadn’t evacuated because they couldn’t, trapped by Magenta’s tentacles. Doc was their only way out.

A thunderous crack split the night, so loud that Doc had to duck back from the makeshift window. Distantly, a shadow climbed the skyscraper. A sharp song rang through Newark of a structure bending and shattering. In the dark, Doc couldn’t make out much of the skyscraper’s collapse, only a glittering cloud of glass and dust that plumed up the far side of the city. She couldn’t hear the Board’s screams either, but they fell through her imagination anyway.

She tried to say that someone might get hurt, but her throat turned dry.

Magenta spoke instead. “Many got away. Others didn’t. I don’t know which is which, but now there are no hearts here except yours and mine. We’re alone.”

Doc listened to the empty wind. “Is the rest of the world still there?”

“They won’t touch us yet. We’re not hurting them, and they’re waiting and seeing. Like our me. Like my you. But them, in the glass.” The walls tensed, and heat blasted from every surface. “They deserved a taste of their own medicine. To taste their mistake.”

Doc turned to the empty throne. “You’re not a mistake.” Now she wished the Yaya puppet was still there. At least it had been a face for Doc to focus on. She turned as she spoke, addressing the whole of Magenta’s palace instead. “They didn’t make you. Their accident formed your body decades ago, and their injection changed it, but after? Our bodies are biology, but we’re minds, too. If we were only our organs, Yaya wouldn’t have been depressed. We wouldn’t carry the past around. We’re creatures of stardust and that’s fact. Your unique DNA let this happen because there’s no one in the world who’s exactly like anyone else.” Her fingers slid alongside another syringe. “You crossed death to find me. You murdered a city. Not them. You.”

Air swept through the palace as Magenta’s skin swelled. “I taste you. I want to kiss you.”

Muscle descended from the ceiling, but it didn’t wear Yaya’s face. Black horns curled from its front, above an eyeless nub and enormous teeth. She was much like Magenta had appeared in Doc’s bathtub, only one hundred times the size and writhing with her own slender limbs. The air crackled around her,

almost the same storm as when Doc would touch her in bed.

Almost. The air tasted of others, too. Yaya was here. The chimeras who'd been confined to the skyscraper. Newark's population.

And Camille, the girl from Kentucky. Her dragon breathed fire through Magenta's blood. Magenta had become a nest of minds. She thought, therefore they were, each and every one making up pieces of the whole's influence, the sum of universal parts.

Doc, too, if she remained in this palace. "I'm sorry," she said, drawing the syringe from the case.

"Tell us why," Magenta said.

"For what I had to do in Kentucky. For what I have to do now." Doc raised the syringe.

"She's still here, Doc. She forgives you."

Doc wasn't supposed to be listening. There was no one else left in the city to end this. She didn't have a choice.

Magenta's voice thrummed through the floor. "My us understands you. Why don't you understand our me? Why don't you understand yourself? Let the stones roll off your mind and see with a clear head."

"I don't have stones," Doc said.

"You do. You're buried in a cairn, but you're not dead. You can still crawl out." This time, the voice didn't sound like deep Magenta. She sounded like Yaya. "Come to us again."

Magenta's stalk leaned close. Barbs ripped from her flesh, snagged Doc's clothing, and peeled it away, same as they'd torn her hazard suit. She stood exposed to December's chill. Barbs sank into flesh again, and then warm muscle encircled Doc's legs, waist, chest. That familiar electric touch caressed her cheek, and she closed her eyes. In the moment, there was no syringe, no double-zero virus, no ABP, only a storm that swept her into the palace's ceiling, where Magenta thrummed in every surface.

"You like us because we replace the mistake in your mind," Magenta said. Her voice quaked through Doc's bones. "We help you forget the past."

Doc's hand still clutched the syringe, thumb over the plunger.

The voice sank into a whisper of temptation from a thousand lips. They kissed every inch of Doc's skin. "You could forget forever," Magenta said. "There's no ABP here. No masters watch your every move. You've killed because they told you to, but now they're dead. If you stab us with that needle, do it because you believe in it yourself."

The grip on Doc's body loosened. Bumps coated her skin as the outside cold drifted down the back of her neck.

Magenta bristled in every surface. “Or you can walk away, leave the city. We won’t stop you.”

The scales of selfishness teetered in Doc’s mind. She had always been a servant to selfishness, either her own or the Board’s. She remembered the desperate glances in Kentucky. Could she have helped anyone? Could she have helped that poor girl? Doc couldn’t be sure whether she had wanted to help, or if she preferred to do as she was told. Obedience was easier. Pleasing was easier. She could excuse any action when it was someone else’s choice. The Board never gave a damn about her, while Magenta offered countless hearts and endless second chances, the kind Doc didn’t deserve.

Still, the needle remained ready. Responsibility was a sickness inside her, and she didn’t know the cure.

“We forgave you,” Magenta said. “But you still want to hurt us. Tell us why.”

Doc didn’t know. For the city’s sake? For ABP? The world could end in flashes of magenta. She had a responsibility. No one else would hold the needle of double-zero virus to Magenta’s neck. No one else would think to do it.

She had expectations. Roll over, Doc. Fetch, Doc. Heel and sic ‘em and play dead. That’s a good Doc.

Tentacles squeezed, and Magenta’s voice became dry. “They aren’t here. You don’t have to be Agent Docia Hall anymore. You can be Doc. Choose.”

Doc tried to stop the needle. She tried to push it. Neither seemed right. She remembered Kentucky clouds, not white cumulus puffs in the sky, but chemicals that covered a high school and then blew back, carrying debris from the dead pale dragon. She’d made so many mistakes that night. Her mind had been trawling for answers these past nine years, eager to turn back the clock. She’d told Yaya and Magenta while they had fought in her tub that she believed in second chances, but was that a lie too?

The needle pierced Magenta’s flesh. She didn’t recoil. She didn’t fight back. The power rested in her to stop this, and she did nothing. Why wouldn’t she take the choice away?

Tears rushed down Doc’s cheeks. “Imagine getting that one-in-a-million second chance and still failing. Second chances have expiration dates, you know? Sometimes you make a mistake, and there’s no fixing it, no matter how sorry you are. You don’t know how else to be.”

“Forgive yourself,” Magenta whispered. “They’ve bound you to their will. We were the same. They told us to hate ourselves and be miserable, and we obeyed. We understand, Doc.” Her warm embrace tightened, her last chance to hold Doc. “And that’s why we’ll keep forgiving you until the end of time.”

The fist of old concerns clung to the syringe. Doc's fingers trembled. Her thumbpad grazed the plunger, but she didn't press down. Plastic slid across skin and out of her limp palm.

Tentacle tips slipped around the plastic and drew it away. Doc didn't know where the case of syringes had gone. She didn't care, so long as no needle punctured Magenta. Her tears fell hot and relentless.

Magenta wrapped around her. "There's no one left to be hurt," she said, her tone patient. Countless heartbeats warmed her skin. "Cry all you need. There's no one left to hurt us."

Doc did as she was told. She didn't know how long she cried, her body racked with sobs. She felt numb by the end, only vaguely aware of Magenta's still-warm embrace and the faint crackle of static in the air.

Magenta would not let go. Doc didn't want to be let go. Tension melted down her limbs at last, a pleasant surrender, and she clung tight to a muscle she couldn't see. The world was dark and full of sweet sensations.

Jet engines roared across the distant sky. They would be flying over Newark soon, their pilots eager to report with the naked eye what satellite imagery could only suggest.

Doc kissed Magenta's skin. "They're going to kill us."

Magenta hummed with the earth itself. "They're going to try. But show me everything you know, *everything*, and they'll never touch us."

Doc agreed. Her mind became an open book, and Magenta ran fingers down every page and played at each pointed corner. An orchard flourished inside, where roots of emotion intermingled. Memories floated in spores, but they were uncontainable things, whereas sensation lived bright and alive.

Things Doc could touch and feel and know. Beloved lightning lit her skin, her nerves aglow with Magenta's tenderness. There was no past here, and no future. The present was hardly an idea, clear and undeniable in its shape, and yet Doc couldn't define it without the ahead and behind. She knew only now, right now, as a miasma of endless feeling and unstoppable bliss. Clouds swallowed her, but there was no poison here, only love in thunder and lightning.

A magenta storm without end.

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Hailey Piper is the author of several horror novellas, *The Worm and His Kings*, *The Possession of Natalie Glasgow*, and *Benny Rose, the Cannibal King*, and her short story collection *Unfortunate Elements of My Anatomy*.

She is a member of the Horror Writers Association, whose short stories appear in multiple volumes of *Year's Best Hardcore Horror*, as well as in *The Arcanist*, *Dark Matter Magazine*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Monsters Out of the Closet*, *Tales to Terrify*, and elsewhere. A trans woman hailing from the haunted woods of New York, she now lives with her wife in Maryland, where together they hunt flying saucers, scout parallel universes, and craft monstrosities in their laboratory/apartment, sometimes all in one night.

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